

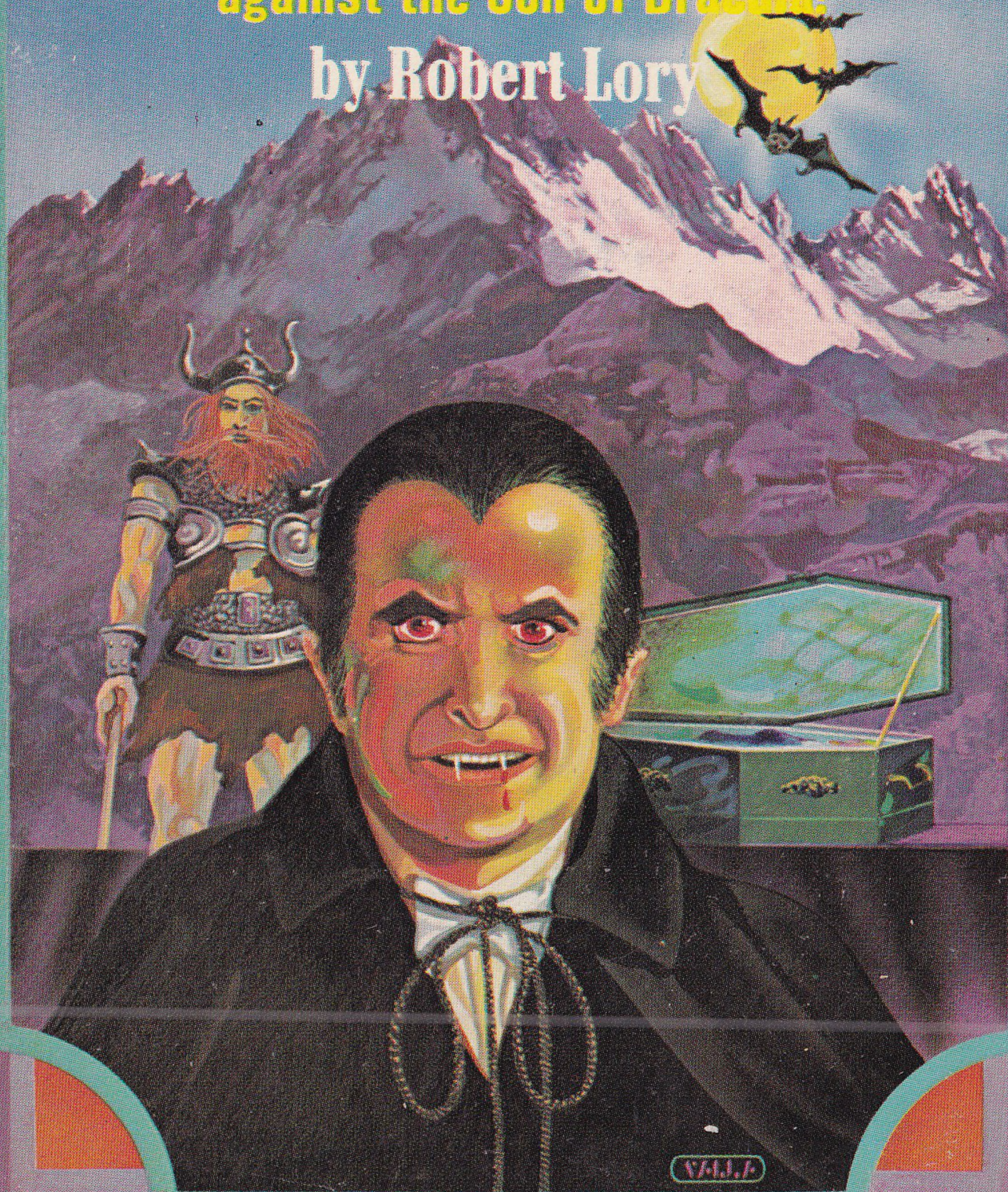
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Challenge to Dracula

The mighty wizard, Ka-Zadok, returns from the dead to seek dreadful vengeance against the Son of Dracula!

by Robert Lory



W.H.F.

IT WAS BEYOND HORROR...

The echo of Ka-Zadok's laugh faded. Whether he was still in the room or not Harmon couldn't tell. His eyes were tightly closed. He could not stand to look at the thing—the horrible thing which had appeared on the cave floor before him.

It was pale yellow . . . hairless . . . its flesh soft and ringed like that of a worm. It looked itself to be half-eaten by worms. A fluid shapeless mass, the thing was, with no eyes but a gaping black hole which splattered warmth in the professor's face.

The stench of the thing was awful. Harmon was ready to retch when he now heard the thing. Not only its wheezing, hot breathing, but other sounds. Harmon forced his eyes open.

He heard the sound of his own cry in his ears as he again shut his eyes tightly. At the base of the mass were pale pink suction-cup feet, fifty or more of them. They were guiding the monster close to the same objective toward which the spiked ceiling was being guided.

Directly toward Damien Harmon.

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by Robert Lory

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DRACULA: CHALLENGE TO DRACULA

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An original Pinnacle Books edition, published for the first time anywhere.

ISBN: 0-523-00711-6

First printing, September 1975

Cover illustration by Vic Valla

Printed in the United States of America

**PINNACLE BOOKS, INC.
275 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10016**

*The second time—
The final time—
When will it come?*

—THE RUNES OF KTARA

CHALLENGE TO DRACULA

CHAPTER 1

In the second-floor office of Craig Weldon's New Haven, Connecticut home, one of the five lights on his desk communication unit began to blink. As his thick, strong fingers reached out to switch on the speaker, he looked at his gold wristwatch. It was fifteen minutes after midnight, late for any call to be coming in, especially late for the guardhouse down by the gate to be calling. And it was especially odd since he was expecting no visitors this Tuesday in early June, and visitors who were not expected were very much a rarity.

"Weldon," he said. He spoke his surname in a quiet tone, but there was a solidity, a rugged strength in his voice.

"I thought you ought to know," the voice from the other end said. "Across the street. A car, just sitting there. A Cadillac, black. One man, a big bruiser by the look of him. Odd thing, he looks young—in his thirties, maybe, but there's not a hair on his head. Completely bald."

"He is alone?"

"Yes, sir. He drove up alone a full minute or so

ago, and he's been sitting there since." There was a pause, then: "Any instructions, Mr. Weldon?"

Craig Weldon thought about it. "No—yes. Take down the license number of the automobile. I'll have it checked tomorrow."

"I've already done that, sir. New York plate. Anything else?"

"No. Merely observe the usual precautions."

When his right index finger had terminated the connection, Craig Weldon rose from his chair. A *big bruiser*. That was the way the guard at the gate had described the man in the Cadillac. Craig Weldon smiled. He himself could be described in those words. He stood six feet two inches, weighed in at two-thirty, not much of which was excess weight. Not all that bad for a man of forty-seven, a man who made his living sitting behind a desk—or behind desks. There was the one at the bank, where he served as a vice president. And there was the one here at home, the more lucrative desk, the one from which he determined the distribution of millions of dollars and the destinies of thousands of people, maybe tens of thousands of people, if you included the victims. . . .

The smile faded. As it did, Craig Weldon turned almost instinctively to a glass-protected watercolor on the wall to the right of his desk. The way the desk light was arranged, the dark watercolor acted as a mirror, and now—as he had done more and more in recent months—Craig Weldon surveyed the contours of his face.

A strong face. One which matched his strong

body perfectly. Dark brown eyes with a reddish tint, a firm nose, thick lips, strong white teeth, a full jaw. And over all of these features, a thick head of only slightly gray-spotted red hair.

Hair. *Not a hair on his head*, the guard had reported. That, and something else—

A black Cadillac.

The car could be dismissed easily enough. Cadillacs were not an unusual mode of transportation in this exclusive neighborhood. Yet, they also—especially black ones—were the primary mode of conveyance favored by members of the syndicate. Fair enough. Even if—

But no. There was no reason for any of the mob to want his blood. He'd served them well, and was still doing so. But even if the car was . . . if it did signify . . .

Hell, the house was well protected. The high fence, the gate—the only gate—and the armed guard. Plus the internal security. Three of them—the butler, the chauffeur, and the gardener. All of them experienced hit men, all of them paid very well to perform the menial chores which were forced upon them in order to justify their presence on the Weldon grounds—not because of what outsiders might think, but because of what Mrs. Craig Weldon might think, she and their two children, who were both off at college now.

Thank heaven.

Thank heaven for the tri-semester system which kept his children from their home. Thank

heaven too that his wife, Maria, was visiting her parents this week.

Thank—?

What was it all about, then? Why did they have such a beautiful and expensive place? Why did he work so hard to give them a house and grounds like this if, now on this June night, he could thank the powers that be that they were not here to enjoy it?

And for a moment the blank stare his own eyes in the glass returned in response to his questions bothered Craig Weldon. Then he shook off the feeling. No, it *was* good that he was alone in the house—alone with his three trigger men. If the black Cadillac signified . . .

Ridiculous! He grinned at himself, looking again at his watch. He'd been working too late recently, every night. Such hard work and no play was affecting his reason. He had done nothing to offend the organization. If it was the organization. . . .

He was sure it wasn't. In that case, the car . . .

Black Cadillac. Yes, that time in the Bronx, the Cadillac had been black. Two years ago, almost, it was. He'd been paying a call on one of the syndicate heads. De Carlo, his name was. Craig Weldon had been ready to step out of his car when it happened. The fourth floor of the building he was about to enter blew outward in an explosion of thunder and lightning. The echo of the blast was quickly replaced by the chatter of gunfire. When the exchange came out onto the street, he recognized two of De Carlo's men—and

watched as both of them were cut down by a lone man in black.

A big, muscular man with a large pistol, probably a Magnum.

A lone man who dove behind the wheel of a black Cadillac and burnt rubber in his getaway.

A lone man without a hair on his head.

"Some kind of import," another syndicate chief told Weldon. "There's no hit man in this area by that description." But when other areas of the country were checked, there still was no positive identification, and the theory changed. "Maybe one of those kooks. Some crazy guy getting even with De Carlo for something we don't know nothing about. A personal thing, probably. Sure, some kook."

But Weldon hadn't bought that line of reasoning. To him it wasn't at all logical. The detonation of the explosives had been of professional quality, taking out De Carlo and three of his men—and the bald man's use of the big pistol was professional, too. But there was more to it than that. There was the coolness with which the killings took place. That Weldon *saw*. He saw it with his own eyes, just as, for a fleeting moment, he saw the eyes of the killer. No, the bald man who took out De Carlo and associates was no kook performing a crime of passion. He was a cool and deadly executioner.

An executioner who, Weldon learned, had put in other appearances.

There were three other cases in which, specifically, a hairless bullet-headed man—yes, bullet-

headed; that was the description and it tallied with what Weldon himself had seen—had performed similar executions on portions of the syndicate's New York area operations. The executions spanned more than a three-year period, but Weldon recalled them well. Yet, on the occasions he tried to link them together, he got nowhere with the bosses.

"No connection," was the response he received, the latest hit always being explained in terms of "some punk trying to move into our territory. Don't worry. We'll find him, and when we do . . ." But they never found "him" or "them."

And now . . .

Craig Weldon leaned over and punched a button on his communicator. Three seconds—very long seconds—passed. Then:

"This is Haines."

Craig Weldon realized his forehead had broken out with cold droplets. "Everything all right down there, Haines?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Weldon. Any reason everything shouldn't be okay?"

Weldon paused. He felt foolish. He was also aware that, in dealing with men such as Haines, "image" played a big part.

"I just had a call from the gate. There's a car parked across the street."

"I got you. I'll check it out—"

"No!"

A pause. "Sir?"

Weldon wiped his brow with his sleeve. "Er,

no. You just stay where you are. The gateman will contact me if there's anything unusual."

"Okay. From down here, I can see anybody trying to get in. Thanks for the alert."

"Right." Weldon clicked off and inhaled deeply. *Thanks for the alert.* Even now he could imagine the chauffeur checking his pistol. He punched the same button again.

"Yes, sir?"

Weldon controlled the tone of his voice. Steady. "I don't want to panic you, Haines. It's probably nothing."

"Probably, Mr. Weldon. Probably you're right. But being careful pays off."

"Exactly, Haines."

He clicked off and stabbed a second button.

"Gate."

"Your bald man in the car. Still there?"

"Yes, sir, still there."

"Tell me. You had a fairly good look at him. Would you describe him as, well, bullet-headed?"

"Sir?"

"The top of his skull—does it shape up into a point?"

"Well . . . sort of. Yeah, I guess you could say that. Is that important?"

Weldon felt something cold deep in his spine. "Keep your weapon handy," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Weldon touched another button. It took six seconds for the response to come:

"Crispin," said the gardener.

"Is your gun near your hand, Crispin?"

"As usual, Mr. Weldon. What's the trouble?"

"None—yet. But I want—"

That's as far as Craig Weldon got. From the communicator speaker on his desk there came a sound of surprise. Then there came a horrendous scream. Then—

"Crispin? Crispin! *What's happening down there?*"

But only silence answered.

Another button depressed. Damn, *damn!* Come on, Sawyer—answer.

But there was no answer. Weldon clocked the movement of the second hand on his watch for ten, fifteen seconds. The butler, Sawyer, was not going to answer. And deep within him, Craig Weldon knew why.

He pushed Haines' button and waited. Three, five—ten seconds. Twelve, fifteen.

His eyes opened wide in fear, Craig Weldon sat down in the high-backed chair behind his desk.

It had come.

Somewhere out there—no, not *out there*, but now within the house itself, *his* house—his death was stalking him. He leaned forward and pressed the button to the gate.

Five seconds, ten, twelve. Then:

"Gate."

Craig Weldon's sigh was quickly cut off. His eyebrows furrowed. Somehow, the sound of the voice on the other end was different from the one he had heard before. Very different, with a touch of some kind of foreign accent—

"Who is this?" he demanded.

"I am pleased you called," came the reply. Yes, very foreign, an accent Weldon couldn't place. A strange—dripping—accent. "I am pleased, Mr. Weldon. I do not, as I am sure that you do not, appreciate callers dropping in without announcement."

"L-look. Please—"

"If it pleases you, we shall conduct our business together quickly. *Does that please you?*"

"No—*no!* I warn you, don't you dare—"

A laugh, one which made Craig Weldon's very flesh crawl. "Dare?" And that was all. Just the single one-word question, and then nothing. Nothing at all.

With shaking hands, Craig Weldon opened the center drawer of his desk, his right hand grasping the handle of the nickel-plated .38 revolver. He'd never fired the weapon, never, but it was loaded for business. Kept in the desk drawer just in case . . . but never really expected to be used. With a fence and a guarded gate, plus three professionals between him and potential danger, Weldon never really had thought . . .

But now—now he had to.

He sat down, placing the gun on the desk before him. Then he held his hands, palms down, before his chest. He relaxed his breathing, steadying it, steadying his hands.

All right. A killer was coming. So be it. Craig Weldon would be ready, and in more ways than one. He had the revolver, yes, but he also had something else—something which, when he had installed it, he had thought was directly out of

some spy novel. But it might come in handy when his intended assassin came through the office door.

When he did, not *if*. In the first place, there was nothing stopping him, not now that the protection with which Weldon had surrounded himself had been neutralized. In the second place, that door was the only way into the room. Unless, of course, you counted the window. Weldon grinned. It was open a bit, yes, but anyone trying to get in that way would be taken care of quite quickly. The pistol would drop him in his tracks. But the doorway . . .

He reached under the surface of the desktop and lightly touched the buttons, primarily to be sure they were still where he thought they were. Fine. They were. All he'd have to do would be touch—just a little harder—whichever of the three he needed and a bullet would snap out from the desk in the general direction of wherever his assassin stood.

He sat back into his chair, then pushed himself up and closer to the desk. Quickly his fingers depressed four buttons on his intercom-communicator. No sound other than the slight hum signifying speaker activation came through. He sat back again, a terse smile on his face. Well, so far the killer had not yet reached the stairwell or the top of the stairs. The smallest of footfalls would be picked up by the intercom, he was sure of it.

And then the smile suddenly disappeared. Replacing it was open-mouthed surprise.

“Good evening, Mr. Weldon.”

The voice, *that* voice—the same as the one he'd heard from the guard booth—snapped his head around toward the window. Beside it stood a tall, wide-shouldered man in what looked to be—yes, they *were*—formal evening clothes, complete with a full black cape.

“How—” *How did you get in?* Those were the words Weldon was going to utter, but he couldn't get his voice to work properly after the first word. There was something about the face of the intruder. . . .

White. Much whiter than normal; even in the shadow of the desk lamp Weldon could see that. White. Almost like ivory or bone was the paleness of that skin. Yet the man looked anything but sickly. His physical stature communicated strength, and strength was the dominant characteristic of the man's face. Physical strength and mental strength as well.

His face.

A high forehead, one which, when combined with the Roman nose, spoke of aristocracy, as did the amused smile and the slightly arched eyebrows—blackest of black, as was the hair, which was faultlessly combed straight back from the widow's peak, perfect in its V-shaped symmetry. But it was not these features which caused the tremor deep within Craig Weldon's stomach. It was something else. The full redness of the smiling lips, that was one thing. The second was the look in those eyes—

Red eyes. Dark red, with burning centers.

“You . . .”

"I bid you good evening, Craig Weldon," the tall man said. Tall, yes, he was tall. Taller even than Weldon himself, he realized now, as the intruder straightened himself from what had been the posture of a mock bow.

"I am armed!" Weldon said suddenly, grasping the pistol and pointing it at the intruder.

"So I see." The response was calm, the expression of amusement still there on his face.

"What is it you want? Answer or—or I'll use this. What do you want? Who sent you?"

A genial smile. "The names of those who sent me, Mr. Weldon, would mean nothing to you, so I shall not bother to reply to that question. As to what I wish—well, that I shall have in any case. Nonetheless, I think it only fair to tell you. First, I want the papers which are on or in your desk. Particular papers which will incriminate you and others in the criminal activities in which you are so lucratively engaged. You will tell me just which papers should be selected for this purpose."

The hand holding the pistol twitched. "You must be insane!"

"Oh? And how is that deduced?"

"You don't seem to understand. *I* have the gun." Weldon's voice was firmer now. "Move around to the front of the desk—now."

The smile on the visitor's face remained. "So that you might use your special protective device? No, I do not think I will do that, Craig Weldon. Not that it would make any difference. No, I suggest that, if you are intending to shoot

me, you employ the weapon at hand. I must, however, press for some measure of speed. Therefore, if you will . . .”

“You must be completely insane!” Weldon said.

“You repeat yourself, a practice I find boring,” was the response.

“Very well, then,” Weldon said, his voice as steel. “Meet your death!”

His right index finger began its squeeze on the trigger, the business end of the weapon pointed directly toward the center of the intruder’s finely attired chest. Above the point of intended impact, the eyes of the man—

The eyes. They, like the visitor’s entire presence, seemed to mock him, to taunt him, to dare him to try to kill their owner. To try? Of course, he would try! Yet . . .

Those eyes. Their very centers now were burning—burning white hot as if they were tiny suns. . . .

A new wave of fear turned Weldon’s spine to ice. There was no time now, he knew, for careful aim and a leisurely trigger squeeze. His index finger flexed and—

Nothing. His finger wouldn’t move! It was snug against the trigger of the pistol, but *he could not move it!*

Those eyes—

They burned into his own, somehow drawing from him all his strength and will, so much so that he could not even direct a small bit of it to the task his mind had set for his right hand to accomplish.

“Why do you not simply release the weapon, Craig Weldon?” the intruder asked. And even before the echo of the strange voice had left Weldon’s brain, the soft sound of the pistol dropping to the thick carpet reached his ears. His hand had opened at the dark man’s words! Good lord, he had obeyed the strange voice—he had done so automatically, without question! And even now, as he wanted to verify this with his own eyes, wanted to look down at his open hand, his empty hand, he could not do so. He could only keep his focus where it was, directed toward the fierce and powerful eyes of the other.

“There is now the matter of the papers, Craig Weldon. You know which papers I mean, I trust.”

“Y-Yes,” Weldon said with a hollow voice. Then: “No! I cannot—”

But then he could not continue. The words he wanted to say would not come through; he could hardly form them within his own mind. Nonetheless, he began to speak again, these words alien to himself, to his will. “Yes. I know which papers.”

And then, true to the words which were not his own, he took a large manila envelope from the top of his desk and began selectively stuffing it with all manner of papers. In his mind he knew that he should not be doing this, even as he knew that during those moments when he was looking at the desktop and into its various compartments, he could not also be looking at the white-centered eyes of the dark intruder. Yet, as his fingers sought for and found the items to be placed into

the large envelope, he seemed to be doing both, for no matter where his eyes moved their focus, their centers were filled with those blood-red orbs with white-hot suns.

And then the envelope was full, and he turned his face from his desk toward the face of the other.

Weldon screamed, or tried to. But no sound came from his open mouth. *The face—*

There was little about it now which suggested ancient nobility. The change that it had undergone was almost complete.

The change . . .

Where sleek black hair had been combed backward over a high forehead, the widow's peak under the now-shaggy, furlike mane had grown down to meet wildly thickened brows over the eyes of fire and lightning. The nose, which had been aquiline, now had flattened back, the nostrils flaring obscenely over thickened lips, the full redness of which blazed out in stark contrast to the whiteness of teeth which were no longer merely teeth but were the sharp meat-ripping fangs of some jungle hunter-beast.

"N-no!"

It was the last word Craig Weldon was ever to utter, just as that horrible face was the last he would ever see—just as those terrible fangs slicing into his throat was the final humiliation that life in this world would demand from him. There was, however, one last feeling left for him to experience on this side of the Veil, an odd sensation, that of strange and steady loss, a physical

diminution of self which was accompanied by the slow plunge of consciousness into a deep abyss of all-pervading blackness.

Or that is how it felt to Craig Weldon as, speechless and sightless, the blood was drained from the helpless shell which was his body.

CHAPTER 2

Some two hours later the long black Cadillac was silent in a closed garage on a heavily wooded ten-acre estate in Westhampton. The thirty-five-room manor which, surrounded by tall pines, rose up three stories in the blackness some fifty yards from the southern Long Island shoreline, was quiet and, except for a dim light from the two large study windows facing the waters of Moriches Bay, dark. But the man in the water couldn't see that light; his eyes were facing outward—outward toward the depths.

He swam naked, the hard-muscled giant of a man in his early thirties. With every stroke he stretched the limbs of his six-foot-five frame to the maximum, his massive chest expanding to its fullness with each inhalation, his lungs emptying themselves explosively as he exhaled, the cupped palms of his thick, long-fingered hands furiously slamming into and gripping the bay water as his powerful arms and legs propelled him like a deadly torpedo toward some unsuspecting target.

Machine of war. It was not an inept description. Both in terms of physical construction and

facial lines, the huge man looked as if his two-hundred-twenty-pound, tan-skinned body had been carved from some material other than the flesh and blood and bone which, in respects other than size and strength, were no different from those of the rest of his species. Then too, the metaphor of weaponry was aided by the bullet-shaped head which topped his frame, a head completely hairless, save for the dark eyebrows looming over dark brown eyes, which now, as this war machine moved through the water, were set in the same ferocity as was the young man's mouth, giving the entire face—a face which women could not help but feel was handsome in a saturnine way—a grim and deadly cast.

A machine of war.

Yes, more than just describing the manner of his present progress this chilled-water night in June, the phrase was correct in summing up the history of the man. For that was what Cameron Sanchez had been—and was now. A machine of war, of death.

And machines of death sometimes must deplete themselves fully. They must once in a while totally exhaust themselves, so that some measure of equilibrium can be maintained deep within their spirits.

A machine of death. Even now as Cam Sanchez tried to empty his mind of matters concerning death and blood, he could not help but linger mentally, if only for brief, flashing instants, on scenes indelibly etched into his memory, scenes

which had brought him to his present state of being. Scenes. . . .

The young, idealistic New York police rookie who had done so well in his initial drive against the drug peddlers of Spanish Harlem that the bosses of the peddlers took special notice of the threat he represented. . . .

The discovery of the planted heroin in the young policeman's squad car . . . the suspension which followed, a dismissal which could have been much more, which could have led, those four years ago, to a jail sentence he'd still be serving. . . .

The old man in the wheelchair who had brought brains and money into the fight which had ended in Cam Sanchez' release, and then the offer of employment made by the old man. Employment. . . .

Employment by a man who, like the Puerto Rican, had been a policeman himself for a brief period in the late 1930s until a waterfront lead pipe had made his lower body useless and made it necessary for his brain to be forever cupped in a protective shield of steel . . . a then-young man who had received for his trouble dismissal from the force because what had happened to him had happened when he had not been strictly obeying orders . . . a then-young man whose knowledge—two doctorate degrees and a master's—and his vast inherited wealth allowed him to carry on his fight . . . a fight he desired to continue still, with Cam's assistance. . . .

Continuation of the fight . . . Cam's body an ex-

tension of the old man's brain, his will. A fight with no scruples . . . exterminate those who would exterminate others' will to live productive lives. . . .

Machine-gunning, explosives—and the less direct methods of setting opposition faction against faction . . . all going well and all, except the bloody results, unknown in the official channels which could not condone the operations of such self-styled vigilantes. . . .

And then, ten months ago . . .

The visit of a black cat to the Manhattan brownstone which had been their base of operations. Then the building of special electronic apparatus, the refurbishing of the old Westhampton manor, the singular trip to Romania's Carpathian mountains and the much more singular crate with which they returned, a crate which even now lay in the center of the bone-white basement laboratory of the manor. . . .

And then the employment of their new "weapon." In New York, San Francisco, Romania again, in Jamaica, Germany, Egypt. The weapon of evil which they had freed from an almost century-long death to rise again. . . .

Instants of memory, brief flashes of the recent past, recollections of blood—as the physical body of Cam Sanchez strove against the dark waters of Moriches Bay to drive from his mind the even darker realities which dwelt therein, strove so that when his muscles wearied, so too might the workings of his mind relax and, for a peaceful few moments at least, he might think of things

other than the horror which he and Professor Damien Harmon had released upon an unsuspecting world. . . .

Such were Cameron Sanchez' thoughts when from the corner of his eye he saw it. Something in the western sky, something high—a flash of light, first a bright, ice-blue pinpoint, then a trail of light. Arcing high, moving further to the west. The oddness of the thing made Cam stop his forward motion. Treading water now, he followed it with his eyes as the trail grew longer.

Odd, very odd. He'd seen nothing like it that he could recall. The tail wasn't disappearing, as was the usual case with shooting stars or meteorites entering the earth's atmosphere, but it wasn't like the sky-flares with which he was familiar either. Even when the "star" disappeared into the haze which formed the upward wall of the western horizon, the tail lingered.

Strange. Strange, too, was the effect the sight of the thing had upon him. Suddenly he felt very cold deep within the pit of his stomach. The fingers of his right hand had moved to his chest, seeking an old piece of silver which usually hung there from a silver chain. It had been given to him years ago by his now-dead grandmother, the old *abuela* having told him that its powers to ward off evil were as useful in this modern world of the science he worshiped as when man could not utilize the mysteries of the universe to create "bombs of hydrogen."

"There still is darkness in the world, *niño*," the old woman with the trembling fingers had said.

“Though you smile, though all of the smart people of science and government laugh, nothing can change the real. And the real, little one, contains the influence of the darkness as well as that of the light.”

Such an old woman, his grandmother. Such ideas she had, rooted in superstitions that the world had almost completely forgotten—which was all to the good, the young Cameron Sanchez had thought. And so he had continued to think—until some ten months ago. As for now—

It was his own hand which trembled as his fingers were not successful in finding that silver symbol which had been the old woman’s gift. He turned abruptly in the water, and his arms and legs stroked even more powerfully in the direction of the shoreline. It was there that he’d left his clothes, having come directly from the garage after cutting the motor of the Cadillac. With the clothes was the silver chain and the old piece of silver which was, although tarnished, still strong in its power.

Cameron Sanchez wanted that strength now. He wanted that power close to his chest.

The power of the cross.

As Cam entered the book-lined library on the first floor of the manor, he was mildly surprised to see that there was no fire blazing in the huge stone fireplace between the two windows facing onto the bay. He reminded himself that the month was June, which in turn reminded him

that the cold he felt was more internal than the effect of the air upon his skin.

Yet the room itself felt cold. Perhaps it was that the only source of light was the battered gooseneck lamp whose bulb was trained on the top of the large and equally battered desk which faced the wall opposite the fireplace. The single light and the resultant elongation of the dark shadows, yes, they might have been one cause of the coldness Cam felt. But as the tall Puerto Rican poured himself a water tumbler half full of cognac and sat down in one of the four wingback chairs arranged near the desk, he knew that the light and its effects were but a small reason for his discomfort. The primary reason was the presence of the occupant of another of the chairs, an occupant somewhat larger in size than himself, one who wore formal evening attire.

"Your employer is pleased," Count Dracula said. He spoke to Cam, but his head inclined slightly toward the man who sat directly before the desk in an aluminum wheelchair.

Professor Damien Harmon looked up from the papers on the top of his desk and, using the tremendous strength of his bull-like shoulders, pushed the upper portion of his body higher up onto the seat. Old the man might be, Cam had thought to himself many times, but there was nothing worn-out about his employer, not from the waist up anyway. And, although the full mane of hair which topped Damien Harmon's hawklike face was silvery white, there was a youthfulness about the eyes and mouth, eyes which

now were sparkling with satisfaction, a mouth which now curled in an assured grin.

"It's all here, Cam," Harmon said. "Enough to put the heroin distribution system on the East Coast out of commission for perhaps a year or more. Names, dates, everything. The late Mr. Craig Weldon was a most thorough man." As he placed the papers back into the manila envelope, he picked up a felt-tipped pen in his left hand and in the awkward script which results from using other than the usual writing hand he printed a name and address.

"You'll take this into Manhattan in the morning, Cam," Harmon said. Then he sat back into his chair. "A night well spent. My congratulations to you, Cam—and to you, Count."

Count Dracula's eyes narrowed, "I wish none of your congratualtions, Harmon. Your petty concerns, as you well know, are no concerns of mine."

The professor's smile tightened. "You have little to complain about, Count. You have gained substantially from what you choose to call my petty concerns. Unless, of course, you would prefer a diet of the synthetic—"

He stopped as the count rose abruptly. It was no secret that, although it was a unique triumph of chemistry, the synthetic blood which Harmon had created was something for which the count had great distaste. Cam reflected that in the months since his own hands had pulled the stake from the heart of the vampire—a term the count also viewed with distaste—Dracula had had little

cause to need the blood substitute. He had consumed plenty of the real thing.

The count had been about to speak, but a sound from a dark corner of the room stopped him. In another of the wingback chairs a huge black cat lay curled, its yellow-green eyes directed to those of the black-caped nobleman.

Dracula exhaled slowly. "Very well." He turned to Harmon. "My companion of long years wishes that we speak of other things. Serious things, Professor Harmon. We must speak of them—and act—before it is too late."

"Speak," said the old man in the wheelchair. "There are hours before us until the daylight comes."

"It was not the coming dawn to which I was referring, Harmon. I think you know that. The Old Ones. They are coming closer, their world approaches this world more swiftly than I had thought possible."

Harmon raised his right hand, palm outward. The gesture halted the count's speech. When Harmon spoke, it was with a wry grin. "It is interesting that you pick this time to talk of things of which you would not speak before, of which you chose not to speak at all in my presence."

Count Dracula sat down again. "Professor Harmon, there are things which you do not understand, things which no human mind can hope to understand. And yet you are among the more intelligent of your species—"

"And you, Count, are among the more deadly

of yours,” Harmon broke in. “You speak of lack of time—”

“I speak of *impending doom*! Surely, if you are not blind, Harmon, you must *know*—”

The book Harmon now took from the desktop was a small, leather-bound volume. Cam Sanchez knew it well. Written in taut verse filled with cryptic meaning, *The Runes of Ktara* had suddenly appeared that night ten months ago among the books in Harmon’s Manhattan library. The book, as much as anything else, had set them on the course of adventures which still were not over, which would not be over until . . .

Until when? Many times had the black-caped creature who was now known as Count Dracula but who, almost from the dawn of time, had been known by many names—many times he had threatened Cam and his employer with the end that he foresaw for them personally. Their blood would satisfy his thirst, he had warned. The warning—Cam knew, and he suspected his employer also knew—was no idle threat. Through electronic genius first, then through a six-month pact which was the result of Dracula’s loss of a deadly wager,* they had managed to keep the vampire under control. But the six-month term had now expired. Only the solenoid implants, one within the body of Damien Harmon and the other under the heart of Dracula, stood in the way of complete freedom for the creature they had released from that crypt under Castle Dracula. And that

*See *The Hand of Dracula*

freedom, or its possibility, was what came to Cam's mind as the king vampire spoke of impending doom.

And yet Cam knew that there was something else. Something, perhaps, to be dreaded more than Dracula, the Black Master. In Egypt, less than a month ago, he himself had glimpsed, through the medium of foully consecrated blood, the dark places between the stars and that fetid world of lost souls.* He himself had heard their mournful and eternal chanting. He himself had been on the verge of joining them in their deathless agony in that dark world ruled by those who were called—

"The Old Ones," Harmon said, completing Cam's thought but speaking to the count. "The Old Gods who destroyed the First Land, those whom you tried—and failed—to destroy, those against whom you have hoarded vast supplies of gold, to fashion a weapon which—"

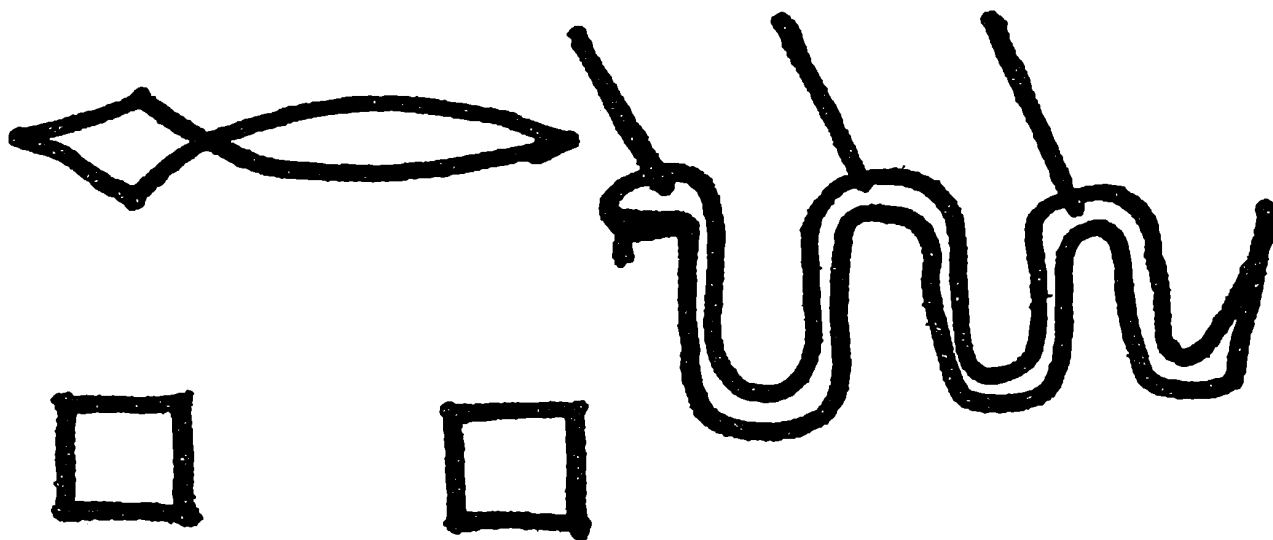
"If you know that much, Professor," the count interrupted, "then why will you not see the urgency? The weapons have not yet been made. They must be made."

"Apef must be speared?"

Silence followed Harmon's question. The professor smiled, turning again to the desk and, replacing the leather-bound book, picked up a sheet of heavy paper on which a symbol appeared. It was one Cam knew, one which, although translat-

*See *Dracula's Discipline*

able from what scholars called Ancient Egyptian, was far older than that system of writing:



"The monster Apef," Harmon said. "A snake speared with the lances of Osiris, or so say those who have studied the ancient writings. But they are wrong, aren't they, Count Dracula? The lances are not those of Osiris. They instead symbolize those mystic lances of gold which failed to destroy Apef before, those strange weapons which you fashioned to—"

"Apef?" Dracula sneered. "He is but one of them. The others—"

"The others are unknown to me," Harmon completed. "What knowledge I have of them has come from that book—and from my limited experiences in the past months."

He paused, waiting for the count to speak. When the vampire did, he spoke quietly.

"Very well, Harmon. You wish full knowledge of these matters. Are you certain your heart can withstand the force of that knowledge?"

"It had better, wouldn't you say?"

Harmon's tone was like steel. The reference to

his heart was obvious. That was how the device which controlled the vampire worked. If Harmon's heart failed—if he died—a small electronic signal would instantly be interrupted. That interruption would immediately trigger a reaction in a second implant, this one buried just below the heart of the count. The reaction would send into that heart a small sliver of wood, one taken from the original stake which Cam had removed from the vampire under the mountain above the small Romanian village of Arefu.

This was the system with which Harmon maintained control. But the small signal could also be interrupted by another means—other, that is, than the death of the professor. Harmon's telekinetic skill was not great, it was true, but it was enough, just enough to mentally move the tiny lever which stopped the signal.

He had used the skill more times than Cam liked to recall.

The count's lips now had curled back in a sneer. "There will come a time, Harmon, when you will not speak so ironically about the stopping of your heart. There will come a time when it will be my turn to speak coldly, when I—"

Again his speech was halted. The black cat in the chair moved almost imperceptibly. The movement was not imperceptible enough for Harmon to miss it, however.

"She knows," the professor said. "She knows you need me—us. Cam and me. If it had not been for us, you would have been destroyed. You

would no longer be able to sit there making your threats."

"You think them *idle*?" The count's nostrils flared now. "You think I make *idle* threats?"

"Perhaps . . . perhaps," the professor said thoughtfully. "I should be finished with you once and for all. Do you deny my power to do that?"

Dracula laughed sharply. "I have been 'killed' before. Several times, in fact. I don't think—"

"You don't think," Harmon repeated. "You don't think that I have the courage to drop you where you sit right now, then have Cam go down to the basement and bring up the casket of earth so that it can be scattered to the four winds? You don't think that your lifeless body can be put out upon these grounds somewhere—until the dawn brings rays of the sun which, touching your body, would forever rid this world of your dark presence? You don't think *that*?"

"No, Harmon," Dracula said quietly. "I do not think that. You brought me back because you wished to fight evil—or what you define as evil. You have used me to do this."

"Yes; however, I now consider you to be a greater evil."

"Perhaps. But you continue to utilize me. You continue—as tonight—to sit there gloating as you stuff papers into an envelope, papers which you have in hand as a direct result of my presence. No, you will not give up your program of vengeance easily, Professor Harmon." His tone grew harder. "And, thus, you should understand my cause."

"*Your* program of vengeance, you mean."

"Call it that if you wish. The elements I am determined to fight are more real, as evils, than those with which you battle. If I lose, Harmon—if *I* lose—your world loses. I think you know that. Yes, your knowledge, small as it is of what the Sphere of Blood steadily brings closer to this world, must lead you to the conclusion that it—they—must be stopped. Who is to stop them if I do not?"

The silver-maned professor sat back, his smile seemingly genuine. Cam, however, did not like the smile. Nor did he especially like the something he saw in the corners of his employer's eyes.

"Well," Harmon said. "It comes at last. The admission that you and I have a common cause—a *real* common cause, one of a long-term nature. The admission that between us is a firm alliance which—"

"*Alliance?*" The question came out as a roar, the questioner rising from his chair, arms shooting out in a rage—eyes blazing furiously.

"Alliance," Harmon repeated softly. Then he closed his eyes. It took just an instant, but his mental energies were marshaled correctly. Within Damien Harmon's mind the blazing white finger of power touched the tiny lever under his rib cage.

Contact.

And push. Gently.

Count Dracula cried out in pain. His hands were on their way to clutching his heart when

they stopped. His eyes turned glassy, showing their whites as the pupils rolled up under their heavy lids. Then his knees gave way.

Harmon exhaled, then turned to Cam. "I felt it was time for a renewal of the lesson."

As Cam started to nod, a new voice commented. In the chair where moments ago the huge black cat had been resting there now sat a woman. She wore black slacks and a black crew-neck blouse. Her shoulder-length hair framed an oval face of delicate whiteness. Her eyes, which were of an odd green-yellow shade, reflected the light of the desk lamp. She was beautiful, this woman. Her age might have been anywhere from the late twenties to the mid-thirties, but then, in women as in many things, looks can be deceiving.

She was in fact some seven thousand years old, rounded off. The same relative age as he to whom she referred as her Master.

"You tempt your fate, Professor Harmon," Ktara said.

Harmon inclined his head, much in the way the count had done on many occasions. "At my age one tends toward recklessness. The alliance I spoke of just now, the very initial act with which I brought your Master breathing from his crypt, that was an act of recklessness. As for the alliance, when I see no need for it to continue—"

Ktara smiled. "And he, Professor? When *he* sees no need for it to continue, what then?"

"Then . . . but that is a bridge we have not approached, let alone attempted to cross. For now, my dear, I would speak of other things. Such as

the thing we saw tonight." He turned to Cam. "While you were in the bay cleansing your flesh—or your soul—a strange thing appeared on the western horizon. A thing which seemed to interest—and, I suspect, frighten—our Ktara."

Harmon looked meditatively toward the window to the right of the fireplace. "Let us speak of it, Ktara. Let us speak of that shooting star which was not a shooting star. Let us speak of that movement in the heavens which has made your mood one of blackness."

CHAPTER 3

For most of the areas of Planet Earth, the year is divided into definitive seasons. Yet there are certain places where nothing changes. In large part, these are places of extremes—the steaming tropics, the frozen polar regions.

The high mountain peaks forming the Roof of the World are covered, even in June, with snow and rock-hard ice—peaks around which whistle and wail the winds of time in treacherous song, treacherous to the human who is not fully prepared, in both skills and resolution, to hear with cunning and craft the beckoning, bewitching call of that siren singing.

High above those lofty peaks which men call the Himalayas, the afternoon sky was clear and cloudless. It was without flaw, except for the strange flaming sphere which hurtled downward from some even higher plane—a sphere with a long, bluish-gray tail, a sphere of some mineral substance, smooth as glass yet hard as the hardest of Earth's elements in whatever alloyed combination.

Downward it came, its arc steep on the decline,

but naturally so. It was as if the perfect symmetry of the arc as well as the thing itself were too perfect to be of Nature. It was as if the sphere and its route were guided by some alien intelligence.

But who is there who will say that Nature does not have intelligence? Who is there who, being intelligent himself, would give as his firm opinion that something that is *natural* is in reality opposed to something that is *created*? For all things were created, were they not? And to bring good and evil into the discussion is of no use at all. For are there not things of Nature—and of human intelligence—which are both malevolent and benevolent? Can the glorious and the sinister be separated at all? And if so, from whose viewpoint?

High above the Himalayas that afternoon in June there was no viewpoint other than that of the frozen mountains themselves. Such remained the case, even as the blue-blazing sphere came closer to the towering peaks. It might as well not have been there, for there were no eyes to see. And when it collided with the whiteness which layered this planet at that point in Earth-space, it might have made no sound whatsoever, for there were no ears nearby to hear. Did it explode? Did it hiss? There is no one to say. What can be said is—

The avalanche was mighty. In its wake, ice separated from ice, packed snow from rock. The Sherpas in the lower villages heard it, as did certain ears higher in the reaches. There were many quick-muttered prayers then, directed to a wide

variety of spirits whose protective shields were deemed effective counters to the whims of the great mountains. Yet the boulders fell, the slides skittered and upended and crashed when they could go no further. It took all of twenty minutes for the roar to hush to a distant echo. And then it was forgotten—by those who lived to hear the echo. There were only two who died. One was a Sherpa traveling alone high in the white kingdom. The other was no Sherpa, but a priest.

A priest of a faith which not even the Sherpas knew.

"It has come!" he screamed to his superior. They had been sitting before golden candlesticks, flaming upon a golden altar within a golden temple which was not far from the peak of the highest of the region's mountains. "*It has come!*"

The superior, a man of such age as to defy an accurate estimate of his years, nodded with a smile. "And if it has? If the worst has come, what will you do differently today? Will you—or I—alter our routine one iota? I think not. Thus there is no need to be concerned."

But the ancient man spoke no further. His acolyte—whose age was advanced as well—did not rise from his arms-outstretched kneeling posture of obeisance. The man was quite and irreversibly dead.

The ancient one, whose name was Qua Siem, smiled at the two much younger men who knelt before him.

"Speak," he said. "Speak first, as that is your will. Then attend to this, our friend."

"Oh, sage," one of the younger men said. "Was he right? Was he correct, oh noble Qua Siem? The sounds . . . they seemed to come from that place above, where . . ."

The young one could not finish. His eyes returned to face the golden tiles upon which his knees rested.

Old Qua Siem, his long white mustache moving with his thin smile, spoke softly and kindly.

"You ask for reassurance, my young friend. Have not the sacred verses answered you already? Think upon them: *It may be*, they say, *that the one of great power shall again be loosed*. If that time has come, it has come, but think upon another of the verses: *It may be also that the Protector shall then return*."

The second of the two men lifted his eyes. "But, venerated sage, you have quoted the verses yourself. Do you not see? The first might well take place without the second!"

"That is true, my son," the ancient man with the white mustache replied. "But if that happens, what are we to do? Would you, knowing that your doom was about to descend upon you, live any differently from the way you now do?"

"That, oh sage, was the question you asked this one," the younger said, his eyes resting upon the one among them who was dead.

"Precisely," the old priest said. "He is to be pitied, in that he died differently from the way that he lived. You—both of you—and I, we shall not be pitied, nor shall we be pitiable, shall we?"

There was no response from the two younger

men. Both of them, although only in their nineties, knew well the verses. They feared the Protector whom they served but had never seen. But also to be feared was that other one.

The one who, so many centuries ago, had been entombed in a crypt of icy whiteness.

Crashing, crumbling, the ceiling of the blindingly white frozen hall yielded to the impact of the spherical object which had disintegrated snow and ice and rock to gain entry into the lone room, only to crash to the uneven floor, cracking its smooth exterior—

Where there had been a sphere as large as a boulder there now, in the midst of the rubble, was a smaller sphere, one twenty inches in diameter, this one also gray but composed of an entirely different substance—a crystalline substance, solid and apparently of great depth, with what appeared to be a mist within it, a moving, swirling mist.

The crystal sphere was motionless for a time, soundless, unchanging except for its wispy center. It was as if some intelligence, the intelligence which had sent it on its journey, was in fact now inspecting the landing place in order to ensure the success of some predetermined plan. If in fact there was some intelligence now viewing that great hall under the surface of the peak of that high mountain, can one say with assurance what emotion, if any, the hall itself created in the viewer?

High roof and floor alike were craggy planes

interrupted at frequent intervals by white-frozen stalactites and stalagmites, which might have been solid ice to their bases or might have been merely ice-covered rock formations. Even the most interested observer, it may be said with assurance, would not pause long to consider that question, nor would his eyes remain upon the daggerlike formations themselves. For there were other things within the frozen hall.

Such as the great chair.

It was made of rude iron, thick and strong and covered with a film of ice. It stood almost in the direct center of the cavern floor. Unornamented the chair was, but there was a sense of strength about it. It would have to be strong, it was obvious—obvious because of what the iron chair supported.

The frozen man who sat there.

His height from the bottoms of his leather boots to the top of his heavy bronze helmet was slightly less than nine feet. His weight, judging by the huge barrel of the chest that was protected by metal strips of armor on leather and by the thick, hairy arms and legs that were exposed by the short-cut vest and tunic, was something on the order of three hundred fifty pounds, all of it warrior-solid. Warrior-solid too was the man's face, with crags and deep scars which told the history of many campaigns. The face looked Mongolian. It looked old, yet the hair, which hung thickly down over the huge shoulders, was solid black—and there was a fierceness too, about the open eyes and the thick snarl-formed lips—which

suggested an age somewhere between thirty-five and fifty.

Like the chair in which he sat erect, the giant was covered with a thin film of ice. Preserved, he was, in the stillness of what might have been death.

And then the small gray sphere spoke.

Not with words, not at first. No, first came a high-pitched sound, a prolonged note, as if created on some kind of tuning fork. Accompanying the breaking of the silence was a change in—more precisely, *within*—the sphere itself. Where there had been the moving spirals of white mist there now was a dark purple light, a pulsating ball of dark flame within the crystal interior.

For three seconds the sound and pulsing continued. Four, five. The color of the flame grew closer now to red, then orange, then yellow. Six seconds, seven, and the color-shifting flame within the sphere grew larger. Eight, then nine seconds, then ten. The fire filled the entire crystal. It was now white, almost the brightest of whites, yet with a slight tinge of yellow—and gray, still translated through the smoke-dark glass which enclosed it.

And it was now that the giant moved.

First it was the thick thumb of his right hand, then it was the whole hand, which shuddered as if from some unholy chill. Next it was the man's eyelids which closed briefly, then opened. Then the left hand trembled, followed by a jerk of the lower part of the right leg. Each movement was

accompanied by sharp tinkling sounds, like thin glass breaking. The layer of ice which had covered his limbs cracked in veins which ran the length of the man's body.

Within twenty seconds of that first sign of light within the gray crystal sphere the sounds of falling ice had ceased.

The man stood.

Huge hands were placed on thick hips, the helmeted head turning on the rope-tendoned neck in order to give the querulous Mongolian eyes a view of the entire hall.

It was then that the voice came from within the sphere, a voice of hollowness, a voice there in that cavern, but yet somehow far away:

"Ka-Zadok—magician of the Western Empire! You are free!"

The giant seemed to ignore the voice. First he looked toward its source, then nodded toward the sphere. Then he held his hands before him, palms down, eyeing them suspiciously as if he did not believe he was seeing them.

"Do you hear, Ka-Zadok?" the sphere insisted.

"I . . . hear."

The voice that came from the man was deep, deeper than an echo from the Abyss. The final word of the sentence was more than just a verb; it was an affirmation, the affirmation that he heard, that he saw, that he breathed, that he moved. That he was *alive*.

"I hear," he repeated. "Ka-Zadok hears."

"And Ka-Zadok is heard," the hollow tone from the sphere replied. "Ka-Zadok is heard by

those who have brought his freedom. Approach us."

"Us?" The giant stood his ground.

"Approach the sphere. There are answers within the sphere, Magician."

Still the giant did not move. "There are questions, ones which I would have answered. The years, the time . . . How . . . much time?"

"Approach the sphere, Ka-Zadok!"

It was a command. For an instant the towering man considered disobeying, then he stepped forward, his heavy boots reaching in four strides the place where the sphere lay. Then he stared down at its shiny surface and the pulsing white-yellow flame within it. "Who are you?" he asked. "How is it you know my name? Why—"

"Questions, Ka-Zadok, for which you are entitled to receive the answers. For now, let us say that you and we are allies. The hatred you feel is directed toward the same one whom we hate. Look now . . . look into the sphere. . . ."

Ka-Zadok lowered himself to one knee. The hollow voice from the sphere continued:

"We have freed you for a purpose, Magician. Look into the crystal. See the face of one whom you know so well. . . ."

The one called the Magician looked. Suddenly the flame was gone. In its place was a face. A white face, dead white, with red eyes and jet-black hair combed straight back from a widow's peak which centered on a high, aristocratic brow.

"It is he!" Ka-Zadok cried. "The Son of the Dragon!"

"The hated one," the voice said. The face was gone, the white-yellow flame pulsing in its place once more. "The one who imprisoned you. He who defeated you in contest. He who—"

"*Contest?* There was no contest!" Ka-Zadok roared. "I did but issue my challenge, to which there was no acceptance. Then he—"

"No matter. His gold—"

"I know of his hoard," the giant said, standing now. "I know where it is—was—held."

"You know of but one location. Yes, Magician, time has elapsed. But that hoard of gold is still where it was; that gold will be made inaccessible to the one whose name you hate. But you must learn of his other hiding places, for they are several and we have not the skills to discover them all. You, therefore, will serve us in this matter. You will gain the knowledge of those other places from the mind of him you call the Son of the Dragon."

"I will destroy him," said Ka-Zadok, his mouth curled in hatred which was more than mortal.

"But not until your first assignment is completed. First you must learn of all the locations where his caches of gold are hidden. Should you fail in this, you shall suffer for an eternity."

The giant's laugh shook the daggers of ice which hung from the roof of the cavern.

"I shall suffer? For an *eternity*! This have I already suffered. Have I not been here—here black of mind in this white hell—for an eternity? I will have none of your threats, none! Whoever you are, whoever you think you are—"

“Whoever. Yes, it is right that you should question our authority, Magician. It is right that you should see with whom it is you speak. With your powers, Ka-Zadok—powers which are considerable and worthy of respect—it is right that you should see us. Look, then. Look closely into the Sphere of Light and find your truth.”

Again the giant knelt. He looked. There seemed to be nothing within the globe, nothing except the bright fireball which filled—

No. Now it was shrinking slightly, and its color was dulling to a yellow, an orange. Swiftly the change was taking place. And then there was no flicker of fire within the crystal, nothing but a wispy smoke which was curling, swirling until—

The smoke itself receded, disappeared, and there was blankness. A complete void, a nothingness. Then the faces appeared.

And the screams began.

It took Ka-Zadok almost a full minute to realize that the screams were his own.

CHAPTER 4

The door to the temple of gold was not locked. There was little reason for it to be, so high was it in the mountains. Yet when the door crashed inward, the old priest and his two younger associates turned in surprise, the two young men shooting to their feet, the eldest remaining seated in his cross-legged position but with interest obvious in his eyes.

The open door brought with it the winds of the night and a squall of freezing snow. The great bulk of the one who entered was hidden for a moment; but when the door slammed closed, he was clearly visible in the candle flames as they regained their flickering strength.

"I have come for the gold of the Son of the Dragon," he said in his low roar.

The two acolytes shuddered at the sight of him and the sound of his words. Both turned toward the old Qua Siem, whose face showed no emotion, who now as before remained seated. It was the old man's place to respond, and he did so:

"You are not he. You are not the one to whom the gold belongs."

The giant stood, hands on hips. He laughed. "I have come in his stead."

Qua Siem smiled. "If by that you mean that you come as an emissary, I must doubt your word. He has not sent you. Otherwise I would have received some message. I have received none."

The huge man with the brass helmet again laughed. "You do not remember me?"

"Is there a reason I should?" Qua Siem asked. "I have not been in my position, humble as it is, for very long. The priesthood is handed down one from another. Yet I know the face of the One who will come. You are not he."

"You know," the mailed warrior said. "You know his face?"

"His face, yes," Qua Siem said calmly. "But there also are words which must come from his lips. Then—"

"No. Now! Now you will see the face of your Master. Look into this."

The *this* was brought before the old man's eyes in three quick strides. The *this* was a gray crystal ball, a smoke-filled ball whose smoke suddenly dissipated.

A face leered out from within.

"It will do no good to lie," the huge man snarled.

Quietly, the old priest answered. "There is no need to lie—ever. Yes, that is the Master. The face you have produced within your glass is that of the Son of the Dragon."

"I also know where he is. Where he is now."

Qua Siem smiled. "You know much. Why then do you disturb this temple?"

"You do know who I am, do you not?"

The old man shrugged. "Your name is Ka-Zadok. There are things which have been said of you."

"That I am a powerful magician?" the giant boomed.

"A magician, yes. That has been said. There are other things as well, things which might argue against the power you claim."

"You are brave, old man," Ka-Zadok said quietly.

A smile. "Bravery often is synonymous with stupidity."

"You will tell me the location of the gold?"

"No."

"You are being brave—and stupid, as you yourself said."

"I then shall perish by my own words. How many men have such a singular choice of perishing?"

"You are asking for death?"

"No one asks for death, Magician."

There was a short silence. "All right," the giant said. "You will not tell me the location of the golden hoard?"

Simply: "No."

"But you will not lie to me."

"That is so."

"Your Master. I am told he lives in a place which now is known by the name New York. This place is a great and populous city on the eastern

shore of what once was the continent of the red man. Is this so?"

"In my dreams I have seen the place. Yes, that is so."

"Your dreams," Ka-Zadok said. "Excellent. That means that there are brothers of your faith in the New York place. Members of your cult."

A smile. "If you know our faith and our humble powers, you know that what you say is true. How else would I have such dreams? It is they—my brothers—who supply them."

Qua Siem shook his head. "You think it foolish of me to speak so freely, do you not, Ka-Zadok? Do not reply; I know I speak rightly." His eyes now flickered to those of his two acolytes, a flash of disapproval in his gaze. They were trembling; they had no reason to tremble. Did they not understand this after all their years of study with him? They did not. So be it. He returned his gaze to the giant.

"I have had other dreams," he said. "Dreams of you, Ka-Zadok. I know who you are and why you have come. Once, long ago, you climbed these hills of snow and ice. You came—"

"I have come again, this time to complete my former business."

The giant's tone was ominous, but the old man chose to ignore it.

"I suspect, Ka-Zadok, that your business will be completed—but in a way you will not relish."

"You are inches from death, old man!"

"In which case, I suggest you kill me. Now. Why not? Is there a hand here which can stop

you? But consider this—if you do slay me, what has it gained you? I shall permit myself to answer my own question. Nothing.”

Ka-Zadok took one step backward, a cruel smile on his lips. “No, old one, I shall not kill you. I will *use* you. Those of your sect who dwell in the place of many people, this New York—they will dream this night.”

“Perhaps.”

“If not tonight, the next. And when they do, one other than you shall read those dreams. And then you will have a chance to see the power of Ka-Zadok!” He laughed. “In fact, I see no reason why I should not show you some of that power *now*!”

As his voice stressed his final word, his right arm shot out, the index finger pointing toward the face of one of the trembling acolytes. The acolyte suddenly grasped his throat, both hands trying desperately to free, from outside, something which appeared to have been lodged within. He gagged, then choked, then fell.

There was no eye in the room which did not recognize death when so confronted with it.

The flash of triumph upon the giant’s face was momentary. It faded with the old man’s comment, one which seemed to come from what was an acute boredom:

“Death. You call that a power? The power of one man to kill another is a small power. There is no man alive who does not have it.”

The yellow face of the huge Mongol turned

bone-white. "In that case I shall show you another power!"

Again his right hand shot out, this time directed toward the second acolyte. His eyes narrowed, just as those of his victim opened wide with terror. His mouth opened, too, but the scream which began as a high-pitched sound ended in a low growl. For the change was by then complete. Where only moments ago had stood a cringing, terrified man, there was something else.

A beast. A beast with a thick, squat body covered with thick, white hair—completely covered, including the upper portion of the face. The lower portion seemed to meld flatly into the short neck. But between the upper and lower parts of that face the two sharp rows of fangs glistened hideously in the firelight.

For an instant the thing which had been a man stood motionless; then it turned toward the golden altar and the old priest. The low growl became a roar, and its shaggy arms extended outward with sharp black claws bared for attack. The creature seemed about to spring, yet it did not. Instead, with a howl, it rushed to the door of the temple and out into the wind-howling night.

"He would not touch you," Ka-Zadok said. "Old blessings remain strong."

But Qua Siem seemed not to be listening. "Only one . . . only *one* ever had the power to create a monster like that. . . ."

Ka-Zadok laughed cruelly. "Things have undergone some change, old priest. There are, however,

to be further changes, ones for which I must prepare.”

“I will not tell you of the gold.”

The giant said thoughtfully, “The gold can wait. First it is time for you to dream.”

The old man looked up at Ka-Zadok. “Dream,” he repeated.

A smile came over the giant’s thick lips. “Yes. It is time to dream of the one with the so-great power—to dream of that hated one, to dream in concert with whoever of your sect is nearest to him now. In that place called New York.”

“I shall not!” the old priest cried.

But even as he said the words, Qua Siem felt the force of the giant’s mental strength within his own mind. He saw the flickers of light behind Ka-Zadok’s eyes which now were boring into his own. And he knew.

He knew that the dreaded magician of legend would gain control of members of the sect and use them for his own purposes. He knew that this would be done through Qua Siem himself. For he knew—

Tonight he would dream.

CHAPTER 5

Outside Cam Sanchez' third-floor bedroom window there was dead silence. The tall pines, the branches of which, when even the slightest wind was stirring, would brush against the side of the old manor, were still tonight, for there was not a breath of air moving. Even the waters of the bay, which throughout the year could sound like crashing thunder or the hooves of a thousand wild animals pounding toward the house some fifty yards from the water's edge—even the bay was still tonight, its surface like a dark plate of glass. Within the house itself there was stillness as well. All Cam could hear was his own breathing.

He lay fully clothed on the top of his bed. His watch said that it was a bit after two in the morning, which made it almost twenty-four hours since he had seen that strange comet in the sky. Comet or shooting star or meteor—whatever it was.

Whatever it was. In the darkness of last night, Harmon had gotten little out of Ktara concerning the thing. She said only that it could be some-

thing from *Them*, which, although she didn't elaborate, obviously was a reference to the Old Ones, those gods of the First Land which men have known as Atlantis. As to what it was or what it contained, she would not say. Rather, she said that she *could* not say.

"Some sort of steel?" Harmon had asked. The question was logical. Ktara's mental powers were effectively blocked by steel. She never had been able either to read or to influence the professor's mind because of that plate of steel which cupped the frontal lobes of his brain. To the question, however, Harmon had received no substantive answer.

"I cannot say," she replied.

"But you are concerned about it."

"Yes. Professor, if you don't mind ... it is late."

The subject was dropped. There was little Harmon or Cam could do about reviving it. Once, then, they had assured themselves that the unconscious count was properly resting within the basement room, resting upon that sacred and irreplaceable dark earth from that First Land, they retired for the night. Cam's sleep was disturbed by dreams, several of them focusing upon that white-satin-lined casket and the soil which covered the bottom.

He dreamed of standing in some high place, that casket in his hand. The night was dark and the wind chilling. There was the hysterical laughter of one who was insane, and Cam could not tell whether it was he himself who was laughing or

whether the voice of madness belonged to another, to one unseen. But he knew his mission—to scatter that precious earth to the four winds, to crash that casket down among the rocks so that not this night, not ever again, would the vampire king rest within that bed of life. For that is what it was to Dracula—life itself. Should there be no covered bed of earth—that specific and sustaining earth, earth from a land which long had been submerged under the deep ocean waves—there would be no place for his soul to rest. And then, when came the rays of the morning sun, there would be complete destruction . . . the end, once and for all time, of the devil of darkness who most recently had gone by the name Count Dracula. . . .

He slept late the next morning, and during the afternoon he busied himself plotting out a strategy for what was to be their next hit on gangland's eastern empire. It was when he went into the library to consult a map that he knew that the subject of the shooting star had remained on his employer's mind throughout the night and the day. Harmon was on the telephone speaking to a Dr. Ayerton. When the conversation was over, the professor's eyebrows knitted in concentration.

Ayerton, he said, was an old acquaintance who was one of the top men at the observatory. "They're quite puzzled by our shooting star, Cam. Had they not seen it with their own eyes—and had they not been getting several calls of inquiry

like my own—they would be tempted to deny that the thing existed.”

“They can’t interpret their readings?”

“That’s just the point. There are no readings. Based on the evidence of all their sophisticated equipment—photographic, electronic, what-have-you—that blue blaze in the heavens last night *never existed*.”

Cam shook his head. “That doesn’t make sense. If we—and they—*saw* the thing—”

“Very logical, yes,” Harmon interrupted. “Ayerton and his friends are following the same logic, which, he admits, is leading them into what is an insane paradox. It should be obvious that, if the *eye* can see something, other recording instruments also—”

“It is obvious. They’ve screwed up somewhere.”

Harmon shook his head. “I doubt it. Other observatories have the same reports. Nothing.”

“Then what’s your explanation?”

The professor paused thoughtfully before replying. “We have an advantage over our scientific friends, Cam. We at least have reason to suspect that there might be something supernatural about that phenomenon we saw last night. They have no such reason. Therefore, it might not occur to them to ask themselves just *how* we see certain things. . . .”

Harmon rubbed his jaw reflectively. “Yes, I think that’s the key. There have been cases, several of them documented on these shelves”—he gestured toward the rows of books in the library—“where spiritual entities which were seen

by the naked eye did not show up on film or other detection equipment. But they were seen—and by two or more viewers who agreed precisely on what it was they saw.”

“See not just with your eyes,” Cam said slowly.

“What’s that?”

“Something my grandmother used to say. See not only with your eyes, but with your soul as well.”

Harmon nodded. “An excellent call for humanism, but it’s more than that. For I believe strongly, Cam, that this is precisely how we in fact *do* see certain things. Any competent specialist can tell us how the eye works and how it links up to the brain, but no scientist or philosopher—to my satisfaction at least—has answered the real question: What is the *I* which sees? The real individual essence—what is that which receives sensations and interprets them? Whatever that essence is, the state of our science is such that we have not yet been able to build it into our most sensitive equipment.”

“My grandmother,” Cam said, “would have liked you. Though the two of you were at opposite ends of the range of wealth and education, your viewpoint isn’t much different from what hers was.”

Harmon smiled slightly. “The viewpoint of old age, perhaps.”

But then the smile was gone, and Harmon was concentrating upon his own inner thoughts. Cam himself had his own work, so he went about it. Only once, in the late afternoon, did he pass by

the library. He was mildly surprised to see that Harmon was not at his desk but was looking out the window that faced the bay.

"Ktara," the professor said. "She's been out there all day."

Cam came to the window and looked. The woman in black was sitting at the water's edge. She sat as still as a statue, facing the water, the fingertips of both hands placed upon the upper parts of her long black hair.

"Your grandmother," Harmon whispered. "What would she have thought of Ktara?"

Two-thirty, Cam's watch said. Recalling Harmon's earlier question now, he thought about it. Or rather he tried to. It wasn't all that simple a question. What *would* his grandmother have thought of Ktara? What, in fact, did he himself think of her?

They had been through much together, he and Ktara. She owed her life to him and he in turn owed his to her. There had been times when the sight of her had stirred up within him something very much like—no, not love, he didn't think that. An affinity, maybe; a closeness. Yet he never could hope, and she had made sure he understood this, that there would be anything enduring between the two of them. She had her allegiance. She had her Master, that creature of blood with whom she had been bound through time from those very first days. It was a bond strange to contemplate, their need for each other, a bond which Cam often had thought the woman

would like to break. Perhaps she could do so, but that would mean that she would have to become a normal human, the irreversible wrinkles of age showing upon her beautiful face until the immortality she knew would be but a memory of one lying in some forgotten tomb.

Ktara. No, he couldn't fathom her, nor could Harmon. She was for the time being their ally against certain forces toward which they shared an enmity. But her stronger loyalties—or bonds—were with the one who lay in the white-painted basement below. And if it ever came to the real crunch . . .

Cam pushed the thought out of his mind. He sat up and dropped his legs over the side of the bed. He was about to check his watch for the hundredth time when he heard it.

In the soundless night outside the house there was a sound. A slight sound, to be sure, but a sound which Cam recognized.

Footfalls. Not leisurely, not hurried, but carefully placed.

Someone was out there, someone without an invitation.

Cam had silently reached the bottom landing of the stairs when Ktara appeared from the hall.

"I will awaken the professor," she said. Her tone was one of concern, as if she knew who was out there, but she was volunteering nothing further—and in fact was not waiting to be questioned. The elevator panel in the hallway closed quietly behind her. The elevator, which Cam had

designed when they renovated the old house, gave Harmon access to each of the floors above ground and to the basement as well. As the hum of the elevator faded, the Puerto Rican moved toward the library. Once inside, he quietly opened the large window to the right of the stone hearth. He had one leg outside when he paused to check the implement he'd brought down from his room.

The .357 Magnum was fully loaded.

Placing the heavy barrel of the weapon beneath his belt, he set the soles of his tennis shoes carefully down on the ground outside the window. The sounds he had heard came from the front or north side of the house. As Cam stood still now and listened, the footfalls came from his right. The trespasser had moved to the west side of the manor. He was moving very slowly, very cautiously. Cam, therefore, decided it was best for him to do the same.

The night sky was clear, the moon and stars spilling down an orchestra of light upon the Westhampton grounds. Nonetheless, the thick trees surrounding the house provided enough dark shadows to give Cam the maneuverability he needed to circle around the southwest corner of the old house at a wide cut. As he moved, his ears still picking up the slow signals of the one he hunted, he noted that the interior of the house was deathly quiet. That was all to the good, even though Cam knew that by now the minds within were as awake and alert as his own.

The shadow against the side of the house stopped Cam dead in his tracks. It was huge. To

throw a shadow like that, the man would have to be—

But no, that wasn't the case at all. Cam's thumb was about to click back the hammer of the Magnum when he recognized that the size of the man had less to do with the size of the shadow than did his position and the strength of the moonlight which projected it. He stayed the movement of his thumb, then smiled.

He doubted he'd need the gun, now that he saw the trespasser with the great shadow.

The man looked to be of less than average size as he moved in crouched stealth closer to the house. Circling around until he was directly behind the intruder, Cam then closed the gap between them swiftly. A bit too swiftly, he discovered, for although he thought he was making no sound, the other heard him—or heard something. In any event, where Cam had only been able to see black hair and the back of a head, there now was a frightened face. And something else.

Something in his hand—something metallic that sent a flash of reflected moonlight back into Cam's eyes.

The flash lasted only for an instant, but it was enough to make Cam take the precautions which years of training had built into his reflexes.

Cam's yell was high-pitched as he launched his attack. The soles of both of his feet were placed so as to avoid any thrust of that piece of flashing metal. The feet were also placed so as to do an effective but minimum amount of damage to the intruder.

The feet made contact, one in the shoulder area of the wide-eyed trespasser, the other in the upper chest. With a resounding thud the intruder's back slammed into the wall of the house, the flashing length of metal flying from his hand. In one fluid motion, Cam's feet hit the ground and his left hand scooped up the gleaming object. His eyes for the moment stayed on the eyes of the other man, between them his right hand-blade ready to drive into the other's windpipe if the need came.

But there was to be no need; Cam saw that at once. The other man had dropped to his knees, his eyes full of fear.

They were Oriental eyes, Cam saw now. He reached down with a heavy hand and yanked the surprisingly lightweight man to his feet. "You're wanted inside—let's go inside," he said, shoving his captive toward the front of the house. As he did so, his eyes flickered downward to the shiny weapon he had taken from the ground.

It wasn't a weapon—or not the kind of weapon that Cam was expecting to see.

It was a gleaming, chrome-plated cross.

Harmon was waiting in the library. His hawk-like face in the light of the single desk lamp looked like that of some Grand Inquisitor.

Cam unceremoniously dumped the little Oriental on the floor before the desk. On the desk itself he placed the metal cross.

Harmon looked at the heavy symbol, then at Cam. Then he covered the cross with a section of

newspaper. His gaze settled on their uninvited visitor, who had now assumed a kneeling position once more. Harmon's voice was cold:

"What is your business here? Who are you and what do you want?"

Trembling, the little man looked from Harmon to Cam and then back to his questioner.

"I—I am sent to see him. The Son of the Dragon."

The professor did not bat an eye. "I asked who you are. And who might this Son of the Dragon be?"

In a voice which was less than sure of itself: "Who I am is of no importance. As for . . . as for him . . . you know that already, Professor Harmon."

"Who has sent you?"

"I am to tell that to no one."

A new voice came from behind the kneeling man. "Not even to me?"

The Oriental's head snapped around. His bow became lower, his forehead touching the floor.

Ktara stepped toward the cringing man. "Must I repeat myself?"

"No. The wrath of She-Who-Is-Both-Cat-and-Woman is known to me. I wish not to offend."

"Then answer this man's questions."

"I am not to do so. Please—I cannot!"

His voice was now a cry for mercy. Ktara's eyes flashed. In them at that moment was little in the way of mercy or any other human emotion.

"You have been sent by the priest of the cold mountains?"

“I—”

Suddenly the man gagged, his hands furiously clawing at his throat. “Please—plea—” But he couldn’t finish the word as, choking, he rose to his feet.

The change took place almost in the blink of an eye. Where there had been a gagging yellow-faced man, there now was something else. Something which Cam could not believe.

A squat creature whose body was covered with thick, white hair. Black claws flashed from hands and feet, and the thing’s mouth was filled with razor-sharp teeth.

It seemed to spot the big gun in Cam’s hand an instant before the .357 roared. The shot was fired at point-blank range, and yet the monster reeled back only two steps from the shock of the slug slamming into its chest. The, with a roar overpowering that of the heavy pistol, the creature lumbered toward Cam, a white-haired right forearm swinging heavily at the Puerto Rican.

Swiftly, instinctively, Cam slashed upward with a left forearm block. When their two arms met, it was as if Cam’s defense was no more than that of a rag doll’s—for like a rag doll, he was catapulted head first into the bookshelves. Only his quickly crossed palms saved his face from making the initial contact.

Another gun now spoke. Harmon had unclipped the small .38 from its special fitting on the underside of the seat of his wheelchair. The weapon spoke twice; then there was a deathly silence in the room.

Cam braced his back against the bookshelves. Ktara stood rigidly in the shadows by the fireplace. The thick-limbed creature loomed, arms raised forward in the center of the room, its salivating mouth turned toward the man in the wheelchair, the man whose small pistol still was aimed at the thing's head.

"Stop this thing," Harmon said quietly to Ktara.

"I cannot," she replied in a whisper. "I have tried."

With a high-pitched scream, the monster waved a steely-clawed paw at the professor. Harmon did not seem overly concerned. "I would suggest, Count, that now might be the time for you to make your presence known. Before it is too late—for both of us."

And now the white-haired thing turned—toward the door of the library and toward the gleaming red eyes in the death-white face of the one who stood there.

For two full seconds the two figures stood as statues. Then, with a renewed cry of screaming thunder, the creature charged the doorway. At the same instant, a black-cloaked hand of white extended toward the rampaging monster, a long-tapered index finger snapping outward. A single word was uttered, low and guttural.

Then lightning struck in the center of the library. At least the blinding light looked like lightning, except there was no crash of thunder following.

When the multicolored spots before Cam's eyes

dissipated, there was nothing in the center of the room. No light, no monster.

Count Dracula stepped two paces into the library, his face seeking some answer, it seemed, from Ktara. She gave it as best she could:

“His mind held little knowledge. He was a dreamer.”

The count looked on the bare carpet where the creature had been. “The form, the way this has come. A challenge.”

“I think so, yes,” the woman said.

“But from whom? Who dares issue—”

“His mind held not that information, Master.”

He who in many lands had been known as the Son of the Dragon turned to the man in the wheelchair.

“Professor Harmon, we must leave this place. We must—”

“Go to Nepal?” Harmon interrupted.

Dracula paused. “Why do you say Nepal, Professor?”

“Is that not correct? Isn’t it also correct that this visitation tonight has something to do with the shooting star we saw last night?”

A smile of amusement came over the count’s face as he inclined his head to the professor. “Harmon, you never cease to amaze me with your intellect, which I judge to be far above the average of puny humanity. Yes, there would seem to be a connection between the events of the two nights. And yes, Nepal must be our destination. But how did you—”

"Not *must be*, Count Dracula," Harmon corrected. "That is for me to say."

As the vampire's nostrils flared, it was Ktara who broke in. "But you *do* say yes. Is that not so, Professor?"

Harmon smiled. "I do," he said to the woman. "Count, as to the question of how I knew our destination, it should seem obvious to any thinking person. Cam—tell them."

Cam pushed his back away from the bookshelves. "Sorry, I must have missed a clue or two while I was bouncing around the room."

Harmon grinned as he placed the .38 back into its clip beneath the wheelchair. "It's not too difficult. First, our visitor was Oriental. Second, it was Ktara who mentioned the cold mountains. Third, from all descriptions—the valid ones—I've read, the creature which our Oriental visitor became was a *yeti*. Correct?"

The question was directed to Ktara, who replied, "That is so. It is what the Sherpas of Nepal call the Snow-thing of Abomination—or, as it is said today—"

Harmon broke in: "The Abominable Snowman."

CHAPTER 6

Sanford Proctor was nobody's fool. A long time ago Cam Sanchez had come to appreciate the intelligence of the large, round man who had been a close friend to Damien Harmon since the year they both had entered service with the New York Police Department. Since he was about the same age as Harmon, Proctor now was officially retired from the force, but now and then he was called upon to perform special services for which his knowledge and expertise were suitable. No publicity, of course, was given to these services, and he himself never spoke of them, but there was a silent understanding between Harmon and this portly man that both of them remained active—in their own separate ways—in the fight against crime which had brought the two together in their youth.

The question of methods had come up rarely between the two, at least in Cam's hearing. Both men were realists enough to know that the business was an ugly one, primarily because the opposition's methods were often ugly. The less said

about how you achieved the desired ends, the better. However, Cam was not overly sure that Sanford Proctor would approve of his long-time friend's current methods. That the round man suspected the truth, he himself had made apparent. For it was Proctor who had come to Westhampton for help—"What appears to be your specialized help"—when the United Nations had been under a peculiar attack by a breed of giant vampire bats.*

In turn, of course, he had been most helpful to Harmon. His many contacts in officialdom had been of much use in eliminating most of the difficulties Harmon and Cam might have faced, especially with regard to entering foreign territory.

This morning he was waiting for a request. He said nothing to that effect, but the look in his eyes as they flickered from the professor to Cam said it all. From the moment he entered the front door until now, at the kitchen table, after the pleasantries had been exchanged and Cam was pouring the second cup of coffee, Proctor had watched the two men of the manor, his expression one of more than mild curiosity, one which said, in effect: *All right, let's get to it. A breakfast invitation is too unusual for there not to be a reason, and that reason has to be something you want. So ask.*

Harmon, too, sensed the silent message. He waited until all three cups were refilled; then the

*See *Dracula's Brothers*

talk of what they had been doing lately—mostly pleasant lies to cover up what they were really doing—halted. Harmon switched the conversation with one word:

“Nepal.”

Proctor didn't even blink. A very cool man, Cam was again reminded. The round man sipped from his coffee cup and replaced it on its saucer. “Nepal,” he repeated.

“Cameron and I have a need to visit there—on rather short notice. My associate Ktara, whom you know, will be accompanying us. If, that is, things can be arranged. I would rather not have to be concerned with such matters as customs and immigration clearances, and there are arrangements I'd like to have made for internal transportation which I'd like to have as few people know about as possible.”

“Nepal,” Proctor said again. And again he lifted his cup to his lips. He obviously was enjoying the building up of a little suspense. No doubt he was hoping to see his old friend fidget; if so, he was disappointed. Harmon, too, began taking more than the usual interest in his coffee cup. Cam was wondering just how long the game would continue when it stopped abruptly with a full-faced smile from Proctor.

“Very well, Nepal. As it happens, I have absolutely no contacts there.”

Harmon smiled back. “But I suspect that, as it happens you do have contacts who in turn have contacts there.”

"Suspicion correct. How soon did you say you'd like to leave?"

"I didn't say. If arrangements could be made for my leaving within the hour, I'd be on my way."

Proctor laughed. "Late tonight will be the best I can do. I think if you book your flights for any time after ten, the proper arrangements will be secured."

"Sandy, I owe you thanks."

"You're right in one respect," the round man said. "This wasn't much of a breakfast. I also suppose that I should ask you why it is you suddenly want to fly halfway around the world, but I won't. There's no use in having us both embarrassed by the illogical lie you would create in the seconds between my question and your response."

"Nonsense," Harmon replied. "I've given the lie a good deal of advance thought. If you'd like to hear it—"

Proctor waved a beefy hand and stood up. "Sorry to waste your creative effort, but if I'm to satisfy your request, I'll have to get things moving immediately. In any case, I'll forego the asking, in that it's not you who owes me, but the other way around."

"Oh?"

Proctor's face was blank again. "I believe so. You see, I received an envelope in the mail quite recently. It contained the records of a fairly influential drug magnate, one who, with his entire security force, seems to have been put away—with

an impressive amount of brutality, I might add.” His eyes now narrowed at Cam.

“Interesting,” Harmon commented. “I hope the records were helpful, even though I wonder why it is you mention them to me.”

“I mention them to you because, Damien, you sent them.” Again his thick palm gestured forward. “Spare me the denials, if you will. I know full well that I would have a hard time *proving* they came from this house, but . . . well, there are very few people in this world who would send that sort of thing to one Sanford Proctor, a name not known to everyone and a name associated by very few with that kind of subject matter.”

“And, secondly?” Harmon asked. Cam, too, was certain there would be a “secondly.”

“And—secondly—there is the matter of the fingerprints. A simple dusting, Damien, that’s all it took. On the envelope. Yours are all over it, very clear too. You must learn to be more careful, my friend. You’re not fooling with amateurs—on either side of the law.”

Harmon assured his friend that he would endeavor to be careful. Cam suspected that he was not talking about fingerprints. Harmon in fact had been very careful—to make sure his prints would be readable. What he’d said at the time had proved to be the words of a prophet: “It doesn’t hurt to let them figure out the source, Cam. You never know when we’ll want to cash in on the return favor.”

Cam wondered, though, what the round man

would think if he knew that they went to great lengths to be careful. Because they weren't "fooling" with amateurs, and they well knew it. Not only on both sides of the law but also on the other side of the Known.

It was as Proctor was preparing to get into his long Lincoln that Ktara came around to the front of the building.

"Ah! Miss Ktara. I was hoping I would get to see you during my visit!"

She acknowledged his greeting with an uncertain smile.

He laughed. "Don't be concerned, my dear. The gleam in my eye may be lecherous, but my physical abilities are far inferior to my spiritual desires."

The smile on the woman's face widened, but Cam detected that her eyes still showed a hint of something. Something like urgency. Nonetheless, her voice was controlled. "I have no concern over your intentions, Mr. Proctor—and I don't for a moment believe your characterization of your physical self."

He nodded genially as he pushed his bulk under the wheel of the Lincoln. "If you ever require proof of that, Miss Ktara, I'll be only too happy to—as we say—do my best. In the meantime, I cannot for the life of me figure out why you keep company with such a reprobate as Damien Harmon. Young Cameron, I can see a possibility there, but by now you must know him for the savage he is."

“Careful,” Cam said in mock seriousness. “You’re maligning a member of a minority.”

“Cameron my boy, in the final analysis, we are all minorities—of one.” He switched on the engine of the big car.

Even before the Lincoln was out onto the drive, Ktara flashed a look at Cam. “Follow me—but quietly,” she said.

He sat cross-legged on the beach near the water. A small man, and even from the side-rear view that Cam had, he was recognizable as being Oriental. He faced the water.

Who? Cam asked. He did not vocalize the word. He didn’t have to.

A dreamer, Ktara messaged back.

It was at that moment that the small, thin man shot to his feet. For a heartbeat he remained facing the water, then slowly he turned to face the two of them. His eyes were blank.

“He’s under my control now,” Ktara said aloud. “Come. I want you with me—in case.”

Cam understood, too well. “In case he suddenly turns into a white-haired beast. I get the message, Miss Ktara. I can be replaced.”

“Don’t be stupid, Mr. Sanchez!” the woman snapped, and for that moment he did in fact feel stupid. No, this woman wouldn’t throw him to the wolves. She’d proved that, so much so that he had been wrong to consider it. In a pull between her Master and one Cameron Sanchez—that was one thing. This, or any other opposition, was

quite another. At least, it always had been that way. On the other hand—

“Will you stop your infernal mental logistics and help me?” Ktara asked.

His mouth began to form into a snarl, then it softened. “How?”

She looked from Cam to the Oriental, who stood as if he were made of stone.

“Simply listen. And not just to what he says. There will be mental messages. I think I will be able to read all of them, but I may not. One or more may be translated on your—what do you call it?—your wavelength, yes. Your wavelength. So listen, please, Mr. Sanchez. What you hear could be very important—a matter of life and death.”

“You’re selling too hard. I’m listening.”

He listened. They stepped up directly in front of the yellow man, whose body had not moved one iota since he had turned to face them. Stone body, stone face. Only his eyes moved—just enough to remain focused upon the green-yellow eyes of Ktara.

“You know me,” she said aloud. It was not a question, but a statement.

His answer was dull, as if he was repeating something from memory in some schoolroom of the damned:

“I know you.”

“You have been dreaming.”

“I have been dreaming.”

Dreaming, Mr. Sanchez, if you must know at

this critical time, is one of the more effective means of communication over great distances!

Cam nodded his thanks. The interrogation proceeded:

"You dream of what you hear nearby, the thoughts of those nearby."

"I dream of nearby thoughts, yes."

"You send your dreams to the white-capped mountains."

"The mountains of snow."

"Where the temple of gold gleams in the mid-day sun."

"Where the temple of gold gleams in the mid-day sun, my lady."

Ktara paused, then smiled. "The name of the master of the golden temple—what is his name?"

"Qua Siem, lady. The high priest's name is Qua Siem."

"And is it to Qua Siem that you direct your dreams?"

"Yes, lady. He dreams and I dream, and he dreams back."

"And what dreams have you dreamt?"

"Dreams of you and this one—the man with you—and the crippled one. You prepare to go to the mountains. And you will bring with you the dreaded Master."

"Dreaded!"

"So I am told. So the mind of Qua Siem has relayed to me."

Relayed. The single word thudded into Cam's brain. As it did, a vision came to him. A man—huge—sitting in a frozen chair of ice. No, iron.

Definitely iron. A great brass helmet upon his head, covering long black hair which surrounded a face locked in death, but a face not dead. A face. . . .

Thank you, Mr. Sanchez! Ktara's mental message came at the same time that Cam's ears heard her exclamation:

"Ka-Zadok! Is it Ka-Zadok who receives old Qua Siem's dreams?"

"Yes—*yes!*" And for the first time the Oriental showed a trace of fear in his voice. "Please, I—"

"Listen . . . listen carefully," Ktara said, her eyes suddenly flashing with centers of white light. "Turn from me. Turn, but while you are turning, continue to see my eyes. Look at them now, but then turn . . . turn toward the waters. They are cool waters, waters which will cleanse you of the evil which has tried to grip your soul."

She looked at Cam for a single instant, then turned back to the helpless man before her.

"Turn—turn and walk. Walk into the waves of eternal forgetfulness. Close your mind to the mountains, think not of them, but of my eyes. My . . . *eyes*. Walk . . . *walk*. . . ."

Meekly, but with mortal fear on his face, the man turned. And walked. In three steps his feet entered the water. He seemed not to notice. Step followed step. When he was knee-deep in the water, Cam took a step forward.

No! There are things worse than death, Mr. Sanchez. Turn your back if you like, but I intend to protect this poor man from those things!

Cam froze in his tracks. He had seen evidences

of what Ktara now claimed. But when the little man had progressed into the bay up to his shoulders, the Puerto Rican closed his eyes.

When he opened them, the little Oriental was nowhere to be seen.

“Come, Mr. Sanchez,” Ktara said. “There is packing for us to do.”

CHAPTER 7

Qua Siem's eyes clicked open at the sound of the giant's harsh laugh.

"You see, old man? Did you see that scene which your mind transferred to mine, did your own mind see it? That woman you worship—she murdered your dreamer!"

Qua Siem looked at Ka-Zadok with scorn. "Death is sometimes the lesser of evils, and drowning the lesser of ways to die."

"You think, old priest, that I destroy unnecessarily?"

"Have you not done so? My assistants—"

Ka-Zadok smiled. "I slew the first to demonstrate my power. The changing of the second was a result of your not accepting my first demonstration. So also was the case in the lair of the Dragon. He must accept my challenge now; without suitable demonstration, he might not have come."

"He comes. The dream acknowledges that. The ones who are with him, they have already begun preparations. He will come."

"Yes—and when he arrives, all must be ready."

We shall require a quantity of gold for our preparations, old man."

"The secret place of the gold shall not be revealed."

The giant laughed. "You are foolish, priest! Do you think that I do not already know the hoard's location? Open your mind and I shall show you—I have known the Dragon's cruel joke for centuries!"

The old priest grasped at the image behind his eyes. It was as the Magician had said. The great iron chair and, under it, the hidden cave. The gray cave, filled to the brim with coins and ornaments and tableware, all of sparkling sun-metal. And then, within that place, there seemed to be some kind of explosion. The mind of Qua Siem was yellow fire. Then it was totally black.

"Rest there, old man," Ka-Zadok said as he stepped over the crumpled body of the priest. "Later you and I must dream again. But not until later—not until your Master's travel plans are made final. Then we shall learn of them—and make our own preparations. Someone of your Lord's stature must, after all, be received in the proper manner."

It was a bit before three o'clock on a bright sunny afternoon when the pilot of the Boeing 727 switched on the No Smoking sign preparatory to landing at Katmandu, capital city of Nepal. In the first-class compartment Cam Sanchez took a longer-than-usual drag on the long black cheroot before stubbing out the cigar in the ashtray at

his elbow. There were but two other passengers in the compartment, and both of them looked with displeasure at the billow of odious smoke which poured forth from Cam's seat. Neither of the two, however, had said a word about the constant cloud which had been over Cam's head since they boarded the aircraft the night before.

It was, after all, a small vice, Cam's smoking. And it was only on such trips as these, when he was forced to travel by air, that he practiced the small vice. For Cam truly believed that the U.S. Surgeon General knew what he was talking about when he related smoking to the horrors of lung cancer. But he also believed that his climbing aboard a plane—any plane—was tantamount to suicide. Therefore, so went his logic, why not smoke, at least when flying? The logic was not all that sound, Harmon had taken great pains to point out, but Cam's reply had been that the act of flying itself was not all that sound.

"Thirty thousand feet in the air is a defiance of every god who ever existed," he maintained. "The cheroots make me feel just a bit more confident in that defiance."

Ktara once entered the fray. "But nothing can happen to whatever aircraft we travel on. I can see to that."

"Do, please do," Cam had responded. "In the meantime, I hope my smoking doesn't bother you too much."

The landing was smooth and their movement into the terminal swift. Just within the terminal gate, a man in uniform, who had obviously been

looking for an elderly man in a wheelchair, approached them. He tipped his cap in deference. "Professor Harmon? Ah, yes. I trust you enjoyed your flight? Ah, yes."

All this came out at machine-gun pace with no opportunity given for anyone to respond. "If I may have your baggage checks, I will arrange to have your things transferred to your small aircraft. Your pilot is awaiting your arrival at this very moment. All very smooth, yes, all very swift. It is a pity you will not be staying in our city longer than just these few minutes, yes? Yes."

And then the man was gone, baggage checks in hand. In less than thirty seconds he was back. "Now if you will follow me, please," he said, and again he was moving, this time with the three travelers behind him.

The twin prop they were led to looked quite efficient, as did the small, wiry pilot who jumped down to the apron and opened the hatchway to the rear of the plane. A moment later, a ramp had been fastened in place.

"Not yet," Harmon said. "I'd like to be sure our things are all accounted for and on board, if you don't mind."

The wait was not long. The baggage—two valises, a rucksack, and a long wooden crate—was duly brought and placed aboard. It was when Cam was about to wheel Harmon's chair up the ramp that Ktara suddenly stopped him.

"A moment, Mr. Sanchez. There is something wrong with this airplane."

Her eyes narrowed to small slits as she turned to face the plane and its pilot. The pilot looked concerned.

"Miss—how do you mean, something wrong? I checked the whole thing over completely." Although Oriental, the man spoke English with a slangy tone.

Ktara's eyes slowly opened again. She turned to Harmon. "There is something wrong, I can feel it."

"The pilot?" the professor said. Now the pilot looked even more concerned. He obviously didn't like Ktara's words. Nor did he appreciate the taut voice in which Harmon referred to him.

"No," Ktara said. "He was simply chosen by his charter company to carry us, following the instructions you relayed through Mr. Proctor. He is curious as to where our exact destination may be, since all he knows is what his employer was told—that it will be in the mountains. But that is all."

"Then what's the problem?" Harmon asked. The pilot should have been relieved, Cam thought, but he wasn't. Naturally. He too was now concerned about his aircraft. But he remained silent, as he wanted to hear whatever it was Ktara had to report.

"I don't know. Something. It is a strange sort of feeling . . . as if some kind of *spell* . . ." She smiled weakly. "I just don't know."

Cam considered for a moment. "Do you advise us to shift planes?" He recalled now her statement of the past—that he had nothing to fear

from any aircraft as long as she was aboard—and wondered whether that statement was still operative.

“No . . . no, I think it’s *safe* enough. . . .”

“Safe?” the pilot asked. “Miss, our planes fly safe, you better believe it. We’ve got a safety record which would be the envy of any charter company. What’s more, we inspect—”

“Very well!” Harmon cut in. “Your plane is fine, your company is fine, *you’re* fine. The question is, do we get aboard? Ktara?”

“We get aboard, Professor.”

They got aboard.

As soon as Harmon was safely strapped into his seat, he opened his thin gray leather attaché case and handed the maps to Cam, who squeezed up the length of the plane’s cramped interior to the cockpit. The pilot had no difficulty in orienting himself or in pinpointing the place of landing, which was marked by a large X on the map. He did, however, have difficulty believing what he saw.

“There? You want to go *there*? And *land*?”

Cam’s voice was level. “According to our information, your company will fly anywhere in Nepal. Were we informed wrong?”

The look on the pilot’s face said it all. He obviously had been told that his passengers were important people and that the fee they were paying for their flight was outrageously high. As Ktara had learned from her reading of his mind, he had been told that the destination was somewhere in

the mountains. But now that he'd seen the actual somewhere—

“Man,” he said, blowing two lungs full of air onto the map all at once. “Man, you got to know that the place you’ve put that X is more than twenty-seven or -eight thousand feet above sea level. You need masks up there. Oxygen masks. And clothing, a lot warmer than what you’re wearing now.”

“We’ve got them.”

“The masks, too?”

“The masks, too. We’ve even thought of our pilot. There’s an extra.”

The thin Oriental shook his head. “Not for me, friend. I’m staying right in the plane. I’m following instructions and they don’t call for a return trip. Drop you off where you want to go—and then return to base. Those are my orders.”

Cam remembered, and the man was quite right. Ktara hadn’t wanted any extra people around, and she’d convinced Harmon that when they were ready to leave the mountains, she could arrange for one of the dreamers in Katmandu to have a plane from the same chartering company fly up to collect them.

“My orders,” the pilot repeated.

“All right, your orders. Follow them. Now, if there’s nothing more . . .” The look on his face was calculated to communicate the fact that there had better be nothing more.

The pilot shrugged. “You’re paying the freight, friend.”

"That's right," Cam said, closing the cockpit door and moving back into the passenger area.

As Cam strapped himself into his seat, he saw that their items of baggage, including the long crate and the professor's collapsible wheelchair, already were strapped down. Ktara nodded to him. "All is prepared, Mr. Sanchez. You should not have lied to our pilot, however. About the mask. There is no extra. We have only three."

Cam smiled. "I didn't lie. I figured you would gladly forego yours. I figure you won't need it under any circumstances, just like your Master. We didn't get one for him. In fact, if you had your way—"

Harmon spoke quietly, "That's all right, Cam. Let it go."

Cam let it go. But it was a point that he had won the previous day. Ktara had maintained that they need not bother at all about such precautions. She, with her powers, would make sure they would need no breathing apparatus. "Your powers," Cam had said speculatively. "I recall an occasion or two when you were completely helpless, in spite of them. No thanks, lady. I plan to spend a few of the professor's easily earned dollars for a couple of precautions." He had done so, and as a peace offering had purchased a third unit for the woman. Somehow, he felt that she had been pleased by the gesture. He felt that way then. Now he wasn't so sure.

"Sorry," he said.

She tried to return his smile, but as before it

wasn't successful. "I still have this/overwhelming feeling—"

The props roared. The plane began to move.

The takeoff was smooth and the climb, although it seemed to those in the cabin to be almost vertical, was also smooth. It was sometime after the plane leveled off that Cam reached for one of the long cigars in his jacket pocket, only to discover that the pocket was empty. He was certain that he'd had at least two of the cheroots there, certain of it—

He noticed then that the movement of his hand had not gone unseen by the professor. He also noted the smug look of relief on his employer's face. The professor, of course, could not have lifted the cigars. No, that wasn't quite true. When Cam had been very close to the old man, maneuvering the wheelchair . . .

Do not accuse the innocent, a female voice whispered in his mind. He turned toward the woman. "If you really feel you must," she said aloud, holding up the two cheroots.

"Thanks," Cam replied dryly, extending his hand.

The hand never made it all the way. But it made no difference, since the cigars had by now dropped to the cabin floor. The reason for the opening of Ktara's fingers was precisely the same as that for the halting of Cam's.

A pilot of an aircraft is supposed to be at his controls. Their pilot wasn't. He stood, as erectly as possible, on the passenger side of the connecting door. His eyes were glassy, as if he had

been drugged. His mouth was open as if he were trying to say something. The mouth closed, and he took three stumbling steps toward the passengers. Then he dropped.

"A trance," Ktara said quickly. "He's still alive, but—"

"But who's controlling the plane?" Cam wanted to know.

"I believe," Harmon said, "that we are about to have the answer to that question."

All of them saw it now, the silent movement at the front of the cabin. Something bright and shiny was coming down from the ceiling. Something the color of pure gold, something rectangular which reminded Cam of nothing so much as that ubiquitous motion-picture screen which, on all commercial airlines, reduced a feature film to television tube proportions. The thought was far from a wild one, for when the movement stopped, the vertically suspended rectangular sheet, except for its color, did indeed resemble a film screen. Two other elements were added to complete the resemblance.

The interior of the aircraft was suddenly plunged into pitch darkness.

A fierce Mongol face appeared on the screen and uttered clearly audible words.

"Professor Damien Harmon . . . Mr. Cameron Sanchez . . . and you who now call yourself Ktara. . . . Have no fear for the present moment. I have no desire to destroy you—yet."

It was Harmon who replied. "What is it you

wish, then—Ka-Zadok? You are the magician Ka-Zadok, are you not?”

The eyes of the face on the screen sought out those of the professor in the darkness. It was as if the Mongol were indeed in the plane himself, rather than just as an image.

“Odd,” the image said. “Your thoughts. There seems to be some sort of shield . . .”

But then that dark gaze snapped toward Cam, and the Puerto Rican felt a burning sensation behind his eyes. How long the feeling lasted, Cam couldn’t say, but when it was over he felt mentally exhausted.

“So,” Ka-Zadok said, a half-smile on his face. “I see now why it is that the dream-speakers could not ferret out your thoughts, Professor. Your assistant’s mind has told me much about you—much. The feeble effort to shield his thoughts by your female companion—with all her skills—is as nothing compared to that simple but effective plate which rests over the brain in your skull. It thus happens that sometimes the defeats of the past can assist in the victories of the future.”

Again it was Harmon who replied. “Is that the case with yourself, Ka-Zadok? Do you think that your past defeat—”

“*Past defeat?*” The roar seemed to shake the entire plane. “There was no past defeat!” Then the Mongol grew silent. “I see. Yes, from your assistant’s thoughts I see that you have been told only that once, long ago, I challenged the Dark One whose name you know as Dracula and that

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FTC Report Oct. '74.

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my return from the fate he dealt me represented a second challenge, one with great consequences for the people of this world. All that is true, but you should have been told more, Professor. It is only fair that you do know more—you and your assistant. It is not right that men should be destroyed without their knowing why.”

Ktara spoke now. “You have us at your mercy, Magician. You must know that my Master is with us.”

“I know that, Woman-Who-Is-Cat. From the thoughts of Sanchez I have learned much of the nature—and the weaknesses—of the Son of the Dragon. Such weaknesses I never would have suspected. It is indeed a wonder that he has survived so long. But his legend comes to an end shortly—yet it will do so on my terms. There will be no easy way for him this time.”

Then the magician Ka-Zadok laughed. “As for mercy, I have none. None for you, woman, nor for your Master. And none for the two humans whom you have entangled in your dark web. But they shall have their explanation.”

Harmon’s voice spoke in the darkness:

*“The fierce magician
stormed the mountain,
his wish to rule it.
His wish was granted.”*

The words, Cam knew, could only come from one place. The verses of Ktara as set down in her *Runes*.

Again Ka-Zadok laughed. "So says she in her writings? Four short lines which say so little, not even mentioning my name? Look now, Professor—look and see. Understand the vengeance which I seek, the vengeance which brings your doom as well!"

The golden screen for a moment went black, and for that moment the steady throb of the aircraft engines reminded Cam where they were.

Then the screen was once more alive.

CHAPTER 8

Images, bright with color . . . images of weapons and armor and giants of men in battle . . . armies of them, clashing with spears and swords and the sounds of death. Images of screaming men and horses pulling blood-spattered chariots. The armies changed, one army's battle colors replaced by another's, but always one man was in the forefront of the fighting. Hacking, stabbing, crushing with spiked boots, he was a true giant, this man who was nine feet tall. His demonic Mongol face was young, but the features which would characterize his later face were there already. Ka-Zadok the Warrior, leader of armies, as victorious as he was blood-thirsty. . . .

A scene now of the aftermath of a mighty clash. Evening . . . the plain is strewn with overturned and half-destroyed engines of war and with the broken bodies of men. . . . There are scattered small fires where those who are able take what little food they have, eating it among the stench of the dead. . . . A bright fire is placed before a striped, multicolored tent . . . and within—

A battle-scarred Ka-Zadok who, with two lieutenants, listens to the lone emissary from the rich city to the south. The emissary is dressed in sparkling, jeweled raiment, in great contrast to the armor of the warriors. He speaks of power.

"Much power is yours, Ka-Zadok, if you do not plunder our great city but instead enter it as the city's protector."

One of the aides laughs. "Power? There is no general who can boast of power greater than that of Ka-Zadok. Was not this army we bested today said to be invincible? Did they not outnumber us, their three to our one? And did we not crush them into the very earth itself?"

The second aide agrees. "We have never routed an enemy army as we have today. They fell before us as if a doom spell had been placed upon them. But now that the victory is ours, this one comes speaking of power—which already is ours for the taking—and he would persuade you, Ka-Zadok, to deny your loyal warriors the share of the booty which rightfully is theirs."

The bejeweled emissary is a small man compared to the three others within the tent, but he seems not to be disturbed by the words he hears. Instead, he is all-confident as he raises his arms toward Ka-Zadok, arms which appear as thin as twigs and as easily broken.

"Listen well to your aide, General, for part of that which he speaks is truth. He speaks of a spell; it was no creation of his imagination. For there was in truth a spell of destruction placed upon our army. Its general served us well for

many years, but of late he has chosen to assert himself in matters which are deemed to be beyond his competence. The rulers therefore judged that you would make a better protector, and thus it was decided to give you the victory this day on the field of battle. This is the kind of power of which I speak, the kind of power which I offer to you."

Ka-Zadok appears to be giving the offer some thought, as one of the aides again objects:

"Sire, we have heard enough of this man's babbling. Let us send him back to those who sent him—under his own power or in a basket of his own blood, no matter which—and get on with matters of more importance. I speak of our evening meal."

He laughs, the other aide smiling as well. The emissary, too, smiles.

"A meal? Is that what you consider to be of importance? Very well. But allow my city to host this meal for you. I have little doubt that your battlefield viands are of great delicacy; yet perhaps my offerings might at least be found to be served with a small amount of additional grace."

At that the emissary bows and steps back. His hand wave and words are spoken. There is a sudden and utter darkness which shrouds the interior of the tent. Just as suddenly the light returns, and the cries of the two aides turn into gasps of surprise. Their hastily drawn swords clatter to the earth floor of the tent, which no longer is a floor of earth but richly carpeted. The old, battered map table which had been in the

center of the tent has been transformed into a dark-stained, gleaming table inlaid with the finest pearl. And upon that table—

Dishes of silver, goblets of gold, all brimming with the finest of feast foods that the eyes of Ka-Zadok and his lieutenants have seen anywhere.

“It is . . . but a trick!” one of the aides says.

“And a minor one,” agrees the emissary. “But it was yourself who mentioned food.” He turns to the brooding Ka-Zadok. “Please—eat. I assure you there is nothing harmful in my simple offering. Eat, and then we shall talk of the real powers that can be yours.”

But the protesting aide has his sword in hand again. “General, this man seeks to fool us with simple magic. I say that we—”

The emissary sighs loudly. “And *I* say that this man has interrupted our business too many times, Ka-Zadok. With all due respect, therefore, I think it best that he be silenced.” Turning, he speaks just one low word. The aide drops his sword, both hands reaching upward toward his throat, trying somehow to stop the fit of sudden choking which has come over him. By the time the second aide reaches him, it is too late.

His face purple in strangled death, the first man lies face up, his back on the rich carpet.

“Ka-Zadok!” the emissary says in warning, noting full well that the general now has his own sword in hand. “As Ka-Zadok the Warrior Lord you have felled many enemies. Think—think of the power which will be yours when, as Ka-Zadok the Magician, your abilities to slay will include

methods such as I have demonstrated. Think on it . . . while we dine.”

A fading of the scene as Ka-Zadok replaces the sword in his hand with a richly bejeweled wine goblet. . . .

Tall spires and minarets of a city in the sunlight . . . the army of Ka-Zadok marches amidst the cheers of the people . . . the General Ka-Zadok in a marble-floored room high above the peaks of the city, himself towering above the nobly attired elders of the place, listening as they speak of his future. . . .

“There shall be no part of our knowledge which will be hidden from you . . . there shall be no man nor army which shall be able to stand before you. You shall have to study and learn, but while doing so you will be our ruler. You must understand, however, the workings of the curse which goes with our offer.”

“Curse?”

An old man with white hair replies:

“In the beginning, when you start your studies, you will marvel at the new skills you acquire. Then the curse will take hold. You will thirst after more and more knowledge, more and more power. As you master each step of your art, your satisfaction in that mastery will decrease, your eye glued upon the next level above it. Such is the curse which has befallen all of us who are masters in the magical arts, and there is no avoiding it . . . just as there is no avoiding the deep abyss into which your spirit will plummet when at last you have mastered all there is to know. You smile

now, Ka-Zadok, because you do not believe me. You do not believe that such power can cause your soul to hang heavy. We, too—each of us—once smiled as you do now. But mark these words. Once you have accepted the road to knowledge of the Power, you accept the unavoidable curse as well.”

Ka-Zadok’s smile now fades as year after year rolls by. He studies old, musty parchments by the light of black candles, he prepares elixirs from the ground-up skulls of rats and the blood of virgins. . . . By day and night he works; only now and again is he forced from his studies to take his army to the field and destroy utterly the force of a would-be conqueror. As he studies, so his powers increase. Simple, amusing tricks first—the producing of wine in a goblet where there was none, or a frog appearing suddenly within the helmet of an aide. Then more complex creations, some elaborate illusions such as winged serpents flying above the city, others more related to the cruelty which remains in the magician’s heart, such as his producing a horde of real and deadly scorpions in the bed of a courtesan who has displeased him. He creates storms from cloudless skies, plagues in cities leagues from his own . . . and he ages.

And the curse weighs heavy upon his soul.

He stands, one night, on the balcony of a high tower. The old man who has taught him much has been asked to join the ruler. “Is there,” Ka-Zadok asks, “nothing else? There must be more.”

The old man sighs. “You have powers other

men could not dream of, Ka-Zadok. You have gained a mighty empire, and you rule it from your city of marvels. You can change the course of Nature by exertion of your will. You can effect change in the heavens themselves. There is nothing more to learn, not in this city."

"Elsewhere, then?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. The things you have learned have come from many lands, from all corners of the earth and places beyond our world. But, yes, perhaps . . . You have reached great heights, Ka-Zadok, but there have come tales of one who is higher. In the mountains far to the east he dwells, in the reaches of the highest of those mountains, there he rules. Rule there, and you rule all."

"I have heard these tales. The one called the Son of the Dragon—it is he of whom you speak. But he rules no empire; his sway is but a fraction of that which I hold."

"In material things that is so, Ka-Zadok. But if the tales be founded in truth, his power is great—greater than ours." Again the old man sighs. "But tales often contain much exaggeration. The power of this Son of the Dragon may be no more than as a reed before your sword. Yet, even should that be so, he still might be the key to the increasing of your knowledge. For it is said that, long ago, this Dragon's Son angered the Old Ones who, although they destroyed the First Land, are powerless to destroy him. If, through your actions, he were destroyed, it is

possible that their gratitude would extend to opening the vistas of their powers to you."

"The First Land? The Old Ones? Are not these but the legends of the weak and fearful?"

"Perhaps . . . and perhaps not. But that is part of your curse, Ka-Zadok. Your soul will not rest . . . until you know."

And with the sounds of trumpets and drums, the army of Ka-Zadok leaves the great towered city and ventures east. Scenes of furious battles now, towns and cities burned to the ground, women raped, children and men put to the sword. And always the lonely Ka-Zadok standing in a high place and facing the east. "I come, Son of the Dragon. Ka-Zadok comes yet closer to your lair. . . ."

And then the mountains, the sight of them causing the warriors of the Magician to falter. They ask what loot, what booty, is there on those high reaches? Is not the hardship in facing the terrain and the elements more than the worth of what they might expect to gain? And Ka-Zadok, after destroying the first few of those who speak against the ascent, no longer cares whether his army follows him or not, no longer cares whether those deserting his force by the hundreds are punished. And so the day comes when the nine-foot giant treks the reaches alone. And then, finally, comes the dark night when he stands before a golden temple, and he issues his challenge:

"Son of the Dragon, hear me! Ka-Zadok, Magician and Warrior, has come to challenge your

right to rule here. Ka-Zadok, Magician and Warrior—”

“Is a fool!” completes the figure within the entrance to the temple. Shrouded in a dark robe, the tall, massive figure has a face whiter than the fresh snow lighted now by the light spilling from within the golden structure. And from the side of the figure in the doorway, a small, black shadow detaches itself. A black cat which is cat for only a moment. It becomes a woman, also white of face, but the white a pure ivory. Green and yellow eyes look at Ka-Zadok dolefully.

“You have come a long way, Magician. The way back also is long. You have come for nothing. Begin to retrace your steps now, while that power remains to you.”

“Do you not know who I am?”

“Your name is known in this place, Ka-Zadok. You have announced your coming many times. But now that you are here, there is nothing for you but a disastrous fate. Do not choose it. Such is my warning.”

Ka-Zadok’s laugh ends almost before it begins. A piercing arrow of light from his forehead shafts forward toward the woman’s head, but is deflected. A depression is formed by the snow which melts on that place where the light falls.

“No, Magician, you cannot pierce my mind to know my thoughts.”

“Then the stories are true!” the giant roars. “There is knowledge here which I do not have!”

“That much is true, yes.”

“And that you—*he*—you both are accursed by the Old Ones, is that also true?”

The woman’s voice has a sharp edge. “There will be no more talk between us, Ka-Zadok. The time for conversation ends. Your doom hastens with each moment you choose to remain where you are. You are warned, Magician.”

And there is no longer a woman there. Instead, a black cat slips quietly back through the temple door. And now the dark figure who commands the temple entrance speaks once more:

“You have heard the words of warning. What is your answer?”

“I can have but one answer. I left a throne for this meeting. I challenge you to battle—at the dawn.”

A grim smile on the face of the one in the doorway. “For me, Ka-Zadok, there is no dawn. As for you, your challenge condemns you. There shall be no dawn for you as well!”

And the eyes of the one in the doorway flash red, then white. There is a swirling, whirling sensation accompanied by thunder and lightning and the sounds of great blocks of ice crumbling, detaching themselves from the mountain. There appears a deep abyss, dark as death itself, yet there is, under that abyss, the golden gleam of jewelry and coins in abundance. And over it is a chair of massive proportions, a chair of iron which gleams brightly as ice within that great chasm. And now, sitting within that chair, unable to move, is the stunned figure of Ka-Zadok, who

listens to a voice which permeates the gloom in a haunting echo:

“You wished for a throne, one in addition to all those you commanded. I have granted you your wish—a throne suitable for all the ages, one of hard iron to match the hardness of your will. I bid you good-bye, Ka-Zadok. May your sleep last for an eternity.”

Thus the magician falls into deep slumber, the scene fading, then sharpening as once more the mountains shake and the ice crumbles under some mighty impact. And there on the cavern floor before the iron chair, now encrusted with a thin sheet of ice, is a small gray crystal sphere which, flashing bright colors, speaks to the magician.

“Ka-Zadok—Magician of the Western Empire! You are free!”

“*Free!*” repeated Ka-Zadok, his face once again filling the golden screen. “Free to reissue my challenge, free to take my revenge upon the Son of the Dragon and his allies. And it will be done my way—because now I am well prepared for the long-awaited meeting.”

Ktara spoke softly. “You think *They* will help you?”

“They?” Ka-Zadok asked. “They might well be inclined to help, yes, but that was not my meaning. Now I understand my enemy better—why it was he refused to meet me in battle at the dawn. I know the meaning of his words, ‘*For me there is no dawn.*’ But there *will be* a dawn this time!

I, Ka-Zadok, vow it! I vow that I will crush this Dragon's Son with the Dragon's own fire—the Sun! And then . . . then will I make my presence known to your world, Professor Harmon, and I assure you that your world will have good cause to tremble, just as you tremble now.”

Harmon's brows knitted. “I am not trembling, Magician.”

“No?” Ka-Zadok smiled. “Forgive me for anticipating. *Now* you may tremble, yes, Professor Harmon?”

The screen went blank, the light of day once more poured into the windows of the cabin, the roar of the engines once more filled their ears. And the level flight of the aircraft was interrupted as the nose of the plane suddenly dipped to a forty-five-degree angle.

“He meant it,” Harmon said, gripping the elbow rests of his seat. “*We're going to crash!*”

CHAPTER 9

Cam Sanchez was free of his seat belt with one twist of his left hand and was moving to the front of the plane as fast as the angle of descent would allow. Hand following hand on the tops of the seats, he moved downward until he came to the gold metal screen which blocked further progress. Rearing back for balance, he sent his right boot into the yellow metal, tearing the entire screen from its lodging in the cabin ceiling. As he half-fell, half-crashed into the pilot's compartment, his narrowed eyes opened in instinctive fear at the sight outside the glass of the wind-screen.

He had seen many views of Everest, but none which were as majestic in daylight brightness as the one he saw now, the ice and snowscapes of its surface sparkling like some great jewel. There was, of course, another element of this view which was unlike any other he'd had. All the others had been in the form of photographs—still photographs. The high peaks before him now were anything but still. They were rushing at him with death-dealing speed.

How fast? The two-word question was dismissed almost in the same instant that it entered his mind. The spinning needle of the altimeter—at least that's what Cam thought it was called—told him all he needed to know at the moment. As to what else he needed to know, that too was a mystery, but a man had to try.

Cam jammed himself down into the pilot's seat. Before him was the "stick"—or that was what it was called in all those late-show films he'd seen on television. He knew nothing about guiding an aircraft, but he'd seen enough scenes in which, when a plane began to nosedive, the pilot pulled back or up on the magical stick and things righted themselves. Of course, that was the case with those particular planes. This one might work on an entirely different principle. What did *he* know about it?

Nothing. But that circling needle on the altimeter told him that, whatever he did, he couldn't foul things up more than they already were. He gripped the half-wheel of the stick and applied steady pressure toward his chest.

Nothing. Not even when he put all his strength into the effort. Nothing happened, nothing moved. Except the altimeter dial—and those ever-closing mountains.

"No, Mr. Sanchez." Ktara had slipped into the copilot's seat. "The airplane has its course set for it. There is nothing you can do to change it."

"And you? What can you do to change it?"

"Nothing. The powers of Ka-Zadok are many."

Cam again tried to move the stick; then he ex-

haled in a rush. "So we just sit here and wait to become an explosive blend of metal and flesh on some mountain top?"

"He does not plan for us to perish this way," the woman said. "He has been anticipating the taste of his revenge, and this way would be too bitter. No, he has definite plans for us—all of us."

Sure, Cam thought quietly as he watched the mountains loom ever closer. Plans. But the best laid plans of mice and men . . .

Ktara forced a half-smile. "I hope you are right, Mr. Sanchez. The aircraft will land without incident, I am certain of it, but as to the rest of Ka-Zadok's plans, I hope that you are correct."

"What are the odds?"

"You saw Ka-Zadok's little screening," she replied. "As skilled and as strong as he is, he is no match for the Master."

Cam recalled with what ease the magician-warrior had met his defeat. "Then you foresee no problem?"

"I did not say that, Mr. Sanchez. It is not yet afternoon, and many hours separate us from darkness. Ka-Zadok now believes that his battle with my Master will be a war between two who are nearly equal in strength. Additionally, he is now aware—through your thoughts—of my Master's limitations. Should he realize, however, by what degree he has underestimated the Master's powers, he might take advantage of the daylight hours to complete his victory. Or he might take a much easier path to his triumph."

"Such as—Cam looked over his shoulder toward the passenger compartment.

"Yes," Ktara agreed. "All he need do is kill Professor Harmon."

The landing, when it came, was as smooth as it was sudden. At one moment Cam was bracing himself for what he knew could only be the end—a swift collision with the glistening snow which now filled the windscreen. Then the stick his hands were clutching shifted toward his chest and the plane leveled off. It was a sliding belly-landing on the slippery surface, the aircraft fish-tailing only slightly as the engines roared out in reverse. Then there was silence as the motors automatically cut off.

As Cam released the control stick, he realized that Ktara no longer was in the front compartment. Moving into the passenger area, he found her beside the professor's strapped-in body. Cam did not like the way the professor's head was slumped forward. "Is he—"

"No. Ka-Zadok has placed him in a deep trance," Ktara answered. "Evidently, he wishes Professor Harmon out of the way for the time being. This may be all for the good."

"I doubt it," Cam said, his thoughts focusing on the solenoid transplant. Without Harmon being conscious to trigger the mechanism, Dracula would be at the mercy of the Mongol—nightfall or no nightfall.

Unless he already had—

The look in Ktara's green eyes killed the

thought. She looked from the large crate to Cam. She didn't have to say it or think it. Cam knew.

The sliver still was imbedded in the count's heart.

He had barely digested that fact when the side door to the passenger compartment was opened with such force that it almost came off its hinges. Two things immediately were thrust into the opening.

One was a spear with a shiny steel point.

The second was a helmeted head, the helmet and the Persian-like face below it resembling something from a dream or—no—they were from one of the armies Cam had seen upon the golden screen.

Two additional spear-points came authoritatively through the opening. None of the three weapon-ends was close to Cam or Ktara, but the threat was obvious. So was the tone of command the voice under the helmet used.

"The two of you will come out. Leave the old man where he rests."

Cam looked to Ktara for some kind of signal. She gave but one—her eyes flashing toward the rucksack strapped to the seat next to the one Cam had occupied on the flight. He understood—or thought he did. His Magnum was in the pack. But she shook her head no.

"The masks. Leave one for the professor."

The oxygen masks. Even as he unfastened the pack and did as the woman had suggested, Cam looked at the face in the entranceway, the helmeted face. This man wore no protection. And he

himself felt no strain on his lungs. But, yes, Ktara had said her powers would render the masks unnecessary, and he supposed the powers of Ka-Zadok could do the same for his minions. And as for Ktara, who knew just how long her own powers would last?

"Right," Cam said aloud, knotting the unit to Harmon's left forearm. As a second thought, he placed another unit near the face of the still-unconscious pilot. Ktara's slight nod told him he had done correctly. The pack itself now, with the last oxygen unit—and his Magnum—he swung over his right shoulder.

"Out, the man said," he told Ktara.

As he passed by the long crate, he paused, his eyes meeting those of the helmeted Persian—or so he had come to think of the mailed warrior. Persian or Assyrian or something. Persian would do.

"No," the Persian said. "That will be transferred at a later time, as will the crippled one." The slight gesture of the spear was enough to show he meant business. Cam led the way out, going first as a meager protective gesture toward Ktara, meager and hopeless by the looks of things. And he was even more convinced of the hopelessness of their situation by the time his boots struck the outside ice.

It was impossible!

The great mountain toward which, it seemed eons ago, they had been hurtling at deadly speed was no longer there! In its place there was, seemingly fashioned from the ice itself, a great palace,

one with high spires and minarets, sheer crystal walls which sparkled like facets of some huge diamond. The massive building, perched high above them, looked like a materialization from the wildest of fairy tales—the place to which, at the story's end, the young princess and her princely rescuer retire to live happily ever after. It was the most breathtaking scene the eyes of Cameron Sanchez had ever beheld—the great castle itself, and the hundreds of spear-toting soldiers who lined the winding pathway up to the lower reaches of the crystal structure.

Yet, even as he stood rooted to the spot, even as his held breath was silent tribute to the powers of the magician Ka-Zadok, he wondered—why had all this not been visible from the air? Could the entire structure have been produced in the blinking of an eye?

Yes, and no. Ktara's unspoken answer to his unspoken question was all she chose to communicate at the present moment. For at that present moment, a long spear was coming dangerously close to Cam's throat.

"Move," the holder of the spear commanded.

They moved, a pathway opening up among the ranks of the twenty- to thirty-man group of uniformed men, who appeared to be a kind of honor guard. The procession which now began did not seem to be heading for the high castle, but for another building which Cam at first did not see because of the intense glare of the sun. It was a rudely fashioned structure of no more than one story.

The temple of Qua Siem, Ktara supplied. Cam took the statement for the simple fact it was, recognizing the name Qua Siem as the one he'd heard on the Westhampton beach from the lips of the dreamer. But that the low building should be a temple was curious, for it didn't look like one—not in comparison to that other glorious structure, the walls of which played with the rays of the sun in such strange ways. Really strange ways, Cam now decided. As the procession moved forward, in fact, the facets of the great castle walls should have changed their perspective somewhat. But they were not doing so. The more he looked at those high walls and the towers which loomed over them, the more it seemed that their shimmering surfaces were reflecting not solely the rays of the sun but some other light, one perhaps generated within those walls. Yet it was difficult to be sure because of the glare, which was almost blinding. . . .

It was the glare that reminded Cam of the oxygen mask hanging from his shoulder. The mask and its air were not what he was thinking of at the present, but instead the tinted goggles which were designed to reduce the blinding effects of sun and ice. His left hand was moving toward the small rucksack when a warning came from the woman who walked slightly behind him.

No, Mr. Sanchez. Do not reveal now what may be of use later.

He turned toward her, the expression on his face matching the sense of frustration he felt.

She averted her eyes, looking ahead to the building toward which they were walking.

The door, when they reached it, opened silently. Out came an old man, who immediately prostrated himself before Ktara.

"The dweller of the temple offers you greetings upon your return to its walls. Alas, I fear that the walls offer you little in the way of strength against your enemies."

Ktara's voice was imperious but not unkind: "Rise, Qua Siem. You are not at fault."

Only the face of the old man lifted, his knees remaining in the cold snow. "It was the mind of Qua Siem—it was my dreaming, oh lady, which—"

"All that is known to me, priest. You have served your Master long and well, and no fault has been found with you, nor with the other members of your order. Rise, please, and greet your other guest."

Qua Siem drew himself up, his old gray eyes seeking those of Cam. "You are no more than an innocent, or so the tales are told. Yet I welcome you both with gladness and sorrow. Gladness because you are allies of the temple; sorrow because I have lived to see the unkind end which the Fates have arranged for you both and for our Master."

Cam looked deeply into those gray eyes. "I think, priest, that you are a bit hasty in your conclusions. The Fates have not yet spoken."

"For *you* they have," came a new voice from within the temple. It was a voice which Cam had

no difficulty recognizing, a deep, booming voice. A voice foreboding, commanding—as if the words it uttered in threat already had been carried out in deed.

Ka-Zadok came from the temple, drawing his thick body up to its full nine feet. His laugh was as thunder on this clear, cold, and windless day.

“I have read much from your thoughts, Cameron Sanchez. As much as is possible from the thoughts of one who does not have much in the way of useful knowledge. Thus you are no longer of value to me.”

The old priest smiled. “Ka-Zadok has said that he does not kill indiscriminately.”

Again the magician laughed. “And I do not! This one, however, thinks himself a warrior. Is that not so, Cameron Sanchez?”

Cam paused. “I’ve done my share, yes.”

Ka-Zadok’s gaze shifted to the Persian spearmen. “Do you think yourself able to defeat even one of my soldiers?”

Cam sized them up. They each appeared to be cut of the same cloth. Rugged looking, battle-hardened. Without their armor he had them outweighed by a good ten pounds. He was taller, and stronger, he was sure of it. And that very same armor which protected them would slow them down. Cam met the magician’s eyes.

“One? Why not two?” he said through clenched teeth.

Ka-Zadok’s eyes flashed with amusement as they looked from Cam to Ktara. “Ah, my lady! Forgive me for not greeting you first! It is an

impertinence on my part which I trust you will forgive, but I feel it desirable to dispose of this whelp before turning my thoughts to more productive matters." His words were now addressed to the priest:

"You, old man, would hold me to my word of not slaying needlessly. I hold myself to my spoken word, priest. This one—this Sanchez—annoys me by his presence, by his assured sense of victory. It would amuse me to put him to the test. I, Ka-Zadok, feel the need to be amused; therefore his death, which you are about to witness, will not be needless. Is that clear?"

Qua Siem did not respond. Cam did:

"Your logic is sound. How sound are your warriors?"

Now the smile was gone from the magician's face. "You annoy me more, Cameron Sanchez. Do you anger me from a desire to have me deal personally with your flesh and bones?"

"It was you, not me, who brought up the subject of your soldiers," Cam said.

"Very well. You believe you are a match for two?"

"Two, yes," Cam replied, looking them over again. "Three, probably."

Be careful, Mr. Sanchez, Ktara warned. *Pride—Goeth before a fall,* he completed. "Three," he repeated.

"Weapons?" Ka-Zadok asked.

"The same as theirs," he said. "Spears or swords—or both."

"Armor?"

“None.”

Ka-Zadok's voice was as cold as the ice which surrounded them:

“Very well. You do not fool me, Cameron Sanchez. You hope that by angering me in this way and by battling three of my warriors you will take my attention from matters more pressing. While it is true that you have caught some of my interest, the diversion you cause will not be a long one. You”—he commanded one of the Persians—“give him your weapons.” A spear snapped back and was launched so that it entered the crust of snow some two inches in front of Cam's left boot. A short, broad-blade sword followed the spear. Leaving the sword where it was, upright in the snow, Cam unslung the pack from his shoulder and dropped it at Ktara's feet. Then he hefted the long spear. As he did so, he saw that a sudden clearing had been made by the soldiers of Ka-Zadok, all of whom now formed a ring some ten yards in diameter before the temple entrance.

All except three of the soldiers. Center-circle, they faced Cam, their spears lowered, the shafts almost parallel and the points no more than inches apart. For a soundless instant the three were frozen, expressions of cruel anticipation on their faces.

The soundless instant passed.

Ka-Zadok's command was short: “Kill him.”

Their initial attack came as if their warrior-lord's command had been *Skewer him*. The three spears shifted levels and thrust forward, each

level of thrust calculated to enter Cam's body at precise areas, starting at the throat and working down to just above the groin. Such was the calculation. Cam had no intention of seeing that part of the deal through. The three-pronged thrust had hardly begun when Cam's attack was launched with two unexpected ploys.

The first was the high-pitched shout of a martial-arts expert, a shout which, as intended, caused a very temporary but very real hesitation—enough to provide Cam with a momentarily stationary target for his second surprise—

Namely, his own forward thrust with his lance, a thrust with a difference in that, although not much more forceful than the lunges of the other three, it continued past the point where Cam could possibly still be holding onto the shaft—it kept going all the way to the unprotected right thigh of the Persian to Cam's left. With a howl the warrior grasped the point of the spear and dropped to his left knee. As he did so, the shafts of that spear and his own became mixed up with that of the Persian in the center. He in turn pulled back on his shaft in an attempt to dislodge it.

Cam, in turn, attacked.

He moved in from his left, placing himself in three quick strides so that the fallen warrior formed a barrier between himself and the other two. It was destined to be but a temporary barrier, as the central Persian, swiftly turning on one heel, used the other to shove his fallen comrade out of the way, while at the same time

swinging the business end of his spear around, the better to face the unarmed American.

He never made it.

With a second shout of attack, Cam cleared the nearest Persian and slammed the sole of his right boot squarely into the nose of the whirling man behind him. As Cam dropped that foot to the ground, his full attention was now on the third Persian. The central one wouldn't be any more trouble. Cam knew that even before he dropped. The loud crack had told him that the man's nose-bone had entered the brain directly between the eyes.

The third Persian, perhaps dazed by Cam's actions, stepped back warily, a movement which took a split second—time used by Cam to reach down and yank from the snow the spear dropped by the man he'd just put out of action. A grimace on his face, he then stepped forward, causing the other man to repeat his backward motion—two paces' worth. That was the distance Cam wanted for the moment. Swiftly he turned on the balls of his feet and drove with full power the first six inches of spear-point into the neck of the first man, who at the moment was struggling to regain an upright position.

As Cam jerked outward on the spear, a fountain of blood gushed from the warrior's neck. But Cam's eyes were already back on the third Persian, and his body was in a low, ready-to-thrust crouch.

He laughed with scorn, his cupped left hand beckoning the man closer. "I don't believe it—

you're afraid!" he said. "Come to your defeat, friend—come on!"

The Persian hastily looked from Cam to the glowering eyes of Ka-Zadok, who stood as some stone giant before the temple. Looking back at Cam, his face took on a grimmer cast. That was quickly replaced by one of surprise.

Because the crouching man before him suddenly stepped back. Standing up in a leisurely manner, Cam grinned. "Okay, my man, let's make the odds more even—okay? Okay. *Now—*"

And with that word, the Puerto Rican tossed his weapon behind him. He spread his hands before his chest, showing them to be completely empty.

It was, of course, a psychological gambit, but one Cam was sure would serve him well.

It did.

The spear thrust was strong but wobbly, just enough for Cam to move to the inside and then under the shaft—and under the forward elbow joint of the thruster. Quickly Cam slapped his hands down on the pointed end of the shaft, at the same time snapping his half-turned right shoulder upward. The Persian didn't let go of his weapon fast enough. The elbow joint jerked into a position no elbow joint ever should be in. The man's scream was hardly out of his mouth before his back thudded onto the snow. Cam let him finish the initial scream; then he planted the steel toe of his right boot in the warrior's throat. Fast and hard.

He turned to Ka-Zadok.

"It would appear your troops have gotten a little rusty," he said. "Or disobedient. Despite your order, I'm still alive."

As he said the words, an idea came to Cam. It was a long shot, but it might work. And in his present position, surrounded as he was by spears which—if the word were given, just one word—would have him looking like a full-bristled porcupine, anything was worth a try. Taking his eyes from those of Ka-Zadok, which were like two burning coals, Cam walked leisurely to his backpack. It was, after all, the kind of thing he might be expected to do. He had agreed to fight three of the magician's men. He had done so. Now he might well go to the place where he'd deposited his belongings and reclaim them.

He might . . . if he was allowed to get that far.

Cam held his breath the entire distance. It was the longest three to four yards he'd walked in his life, but he made it. Bending down, his back to Ka-Zadok, he tried to be casual as his left hand gripped the strap of the pack. The top flap already was open, and the thing his eyes sought was there on top. So far, so good.

Then Ka-Zadok spoke:

"Pride. Has not the woman reminded you of some saying? I am not familiar with it personally, but it seems to me a good one. Pride goes before a fall. Are you ready to take yours now?"

Cam's right hand reached under the pack flap. "I was challenged and I won. Does Ka-Zadok repay victory with treachery?"

To Cam's surprise, the magician smiled.

“No, Cameron Sanchez. Ka-Zadok repays victory with the opportunity for more victory. You have met before, I believe, one of my more formidable minions—”

There was a flash of light in the center of the arena which still was formed by the ring of Persian spear-carriers. When the flash was extinguished, something new had been added.

Something hairy. Something snarling. A *yeti*.

A charging *yeti*.

Cam didn't even think about it. His hand came out of the rucksack, the hand molded firmly around the butt of his .357 Magnum, the same hand snapping out toward the face of the screaming creature—and the trigger finger gently squeezing backward.

The explosion came when the monster was no more than six feet from Cam. The thing fell onto its back in the snow, a good three-quarters of its face scattered far behind it.

After his previous experience with trying to down a *yeti* with a slug from the big gun, Cam had done some surgery on the bullets he was using. In the old days the mob had called them dum-dums—hollow-points. When they hit, they took meat and bone—and whatever stood in their way as they flattened and spread. Small hole going in sometimes; big, gaping hole coming out—always.

But Cam wasn't thinking about that now. He was thinking of the second bullet in the Magnum cylinder. The barrel of the big weapon was now aimed point-blank at the black hairs in the broad

spot between the eyes of the nine-foot giant he faced.

Again Cam squeezed the trigger.

Explosion. And Ka-Zadok's laugh.

"Fire that again, if you will. But if you do, the pellet of death will strike the life from the old priest."

Cam now heard Ktara's voice cut the cold silence. "The priest is protected."

"*You* protect him?" Ka-Zadok asked.

"I protect him," she answered quietly.

Cam said nothing. He dropped the pistol back into the rucksack. Regardless of where Ka-Zadok might or might not send the bullet, it definitely wasn't going to the place Cam aimed it. He knew where that last one should have gone—and it hadn't gone there. Simple enough demonstration for any thickheaded clod.

Meanwhile, Ka-Zadok had shifted his attention to the woman in black. "Do you think," he asked slowly, "that now is an appropriate time to test our relative abilities?"

"Ka-Zadok rules here," Ktara said simply.

The giant paused. "You are fortunate. There are things I must do, other and more important things. I trust, however, that you will enter your temple—you and your priest and your, ah, *warrior* companion. I trust that you will do so immediately. For if you have ears—"

He did not elaborate. The rumble, slight but growing steadily louder, was message enough for at least one of them. It was Qua Siem who said the word:

"Avalanche!"

Cam would have been frozen in place had not something tugged mightily at his mind—Ktara, no doubt. Even so, as he rushed through the opening of the temple behind the old priest, he saw from the corner of his eyes the tumbling wall of white that filled the northern sky. Even when the door was shut firmly the roar of the thing was deafening, and so it remained for several minutes. And then there was silence.

Cam went to the door.

"No," said Qua Siem. "You are to stay here."

Ktara agreed. "If you should so much as step outside that door new fallings of snow will bury you alive."

Cam looked at the woman. "Then how do we get out of here?"

"We don't," Ktara said. "Not now."

"The professor," Cam said. Again he turned to the doorway.

"Listen!" Ktara said. "Listen to me, Mr. Sanchez. You can do no good out there, not now. Later, perhaps. Then—"

"Then—what?" Cam turned on her fiercely. "I know something of your powers. I know that, up until now, you've had little trouble in defending me and the professor from what we've come up against. Just now, our friend Ka-Zadok backed off from a test with you—he backed off! And now, lady, you're the one who's backing off. Why?"

Ktara seemed to be trying to be patient. "Mr. Sanchez, do *you* know who would have won the

battle between Ka-Zadok and me? Do you really *know*?"

"No, but—"

"That's the point. I do not know, either. But, just as important, neither does Ka-Zadok. He had been promised powers by Them—the Old Ones—for his battle against the Master. He is not certain that They would give him powers against me. And I—I am not certain regarding that either."

"You let him read my mind!"

"Yes." She smiled slightly. "But there were certain things he did not learn from your thoughts, Mr. Sanchez. I saw to that. Certain important things."

"Such as?"

"Such as the real relationship between Professor Harmon and my Master. He knows only that there is a special bond. He does not understand it fully. Do you understand what I mean?"

Cam hesitated. "He doesn't know that the life of Dracula—"

"Depends upon the life of Damien Harmon. No, he does not know that."

"Okay, but what about the professor? Right now—"

"At the moment, he is where we last saw him."

Qua Siem added, "The avalanche will not have touched the place of your aircraft's landing."

"The avalanche," Cam repeated. "What about that?"

"What, precisely, about that?" Ktara asked. Then she smiled, because she knew the source of

his question. "You are referring to all of the others out there—Ka-Zadok's Persian warriors."

"That's right. They couldn't have had the chance to get away."

"They didn't."

Cam couldn't believe it. "Ka-Zadok buried his own men?"

"No."

"No? But you just said—"

"Mr. Sanchez. Those warriors you saw—they were not buried. They simply disappeared once we were inside this temple. They—all of them, including the three you fought—were nothing more than the mental creations of the magician. They never existed."

"Never . . . no, I don't accept that. Once before I had the opportunity to fight with mental creations.* They were nothing but wisp, they didn't bend or break or bleed and they couldn't have done me any damage. These men—I'm dead certain they could have killed me."

"That is true. Ka-Zadok's magic is powerful."

It was the old priest who again attempted to intercede between his two guests. "But for the time being you are safe in this place, both of you. As my lady says, the magician will not attempt to kill any of us until he first is victorious over our Master. Then"—he smiled—"but then, he will not be victorious over our Master, will he?"

Cam's eyes fell toward his watch. Five-fifteen in the afternoon. A long time until darkness. He

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looked at Ktara. "The priest has asked a question. Be kind enough to answer it."

"You are thinking of Professor Harmon, is that correct?"

"It is," Cam replied. "And so are you, lady—so are you."

CHAPTER 10

Pure blackness . . . a closed and suffocating crypt . . . no pain, no sharp sense of anything at all . . . but somehow stifling, as if surrounded by a cloud of nothingness . . . and then a small pinpoint of light, growing larger . . . until the blackness lifted. . . .

Harmon shook his head to clear away the last vestiges of this strange lethargy. As he did so, he looked for Cam. Cam had been saying something—or was it Ktara? Just a moment ago, it was. And yet it couldn't have been. Harmon was alone in the aircraft.

No, not alone. The man who had piloted the plane was still lying face up in the aisle. And behind the seat to which the seat belt held him fast—

The long wooden crate, strapped down in its place. Unopened so far.

The door to the rear of the plane was closed, and to the front—

Yes. The golden screen. He remembered now that Cam had smashed the thing in an effort to get to the controls. He had been successful, obviously. The plane had not crashed—at least there

was no evidence that it had. But where had the others gone?

Again Harmon shook his head. His watch said it was past five in the afternoon, and the sunlight streaming through the aircraft windows on the right side also indicated late afternoon. It was obvious, then, that he had been unconscious. Perhaps some blow on the head

But no. Not only was there no pain anywhere, but his searching fingers found no bump or sensitive bruise or area of matted blood. But for almost an hour, maybe more, he had been blacked out. Lack of oxygen, perhaps? He saw the air unit which someone had tied to his wrist. But no, if lack of oxygen had been the cause of his passing out, there would be, he was certain, some indication of that, some effect ranging anywhere from a severe headache to his not having been able to wake up at all.

All right, he'd have to let the question of what happened to him wait. For now, first things first.

First thing . . . to get out of the seat he was in and into his wheelchair. He looked behind him. The collapsible aluminum chair was folded up and neatly lashed to the interior of the plane three seats to the rear. It would take a bit of doing, but he reflected that he had little else to do at the moment. Unbuckling the seat belt which held him and then unstrapping the oxygen unit from his wrist, he used the muscles of his arms and shoulders to lift the upper portion of his body up and around and to the right, as close to the aisle as he could get. Now came the tricky

part. Sliding both hands to the right along the topmost part of the back of the seat, he stopped when his hands reached that point where the backrest began to arc downward. Filling his lungs, he balanced his full weight on his left hand—then his right hand struck out for the elbow-rest of the seat behind his.

Contact was abrupt and solid but temporary, as the crippled man's weight fell forward more than he'd intended; he concentrated upon making his landing in the aisle as painless as possible. His thick shoulder and forearm took the brunt of the fall, his useless lower body following with no sensation at all.

"Damn it!" Harmon exhaled explosively. Then he scowled. It wasn't the fall he was damning, nor was it his physical handicap. It was the indignity of finding oneself face down on the floor. Such a posture did not at all suit the esteem and station of one Professor Damien Harmon!

He laughed sharply at himself. Such a thought might be considered just a bit inappropriate at the present moment. He was on the damned floor and that was that. And as long as he was, he might as well lose a little more dignity in achieving his goal.

He began to crawl.

It was, under the circumstances, probably the most effective method of traveling, the metal legs of the seats forming excellent handles with which his hands and arms and shoulders could pull him along quite easily. When he had reached the place where his chair was trussed to the wall, with a

minimum of effort he pulled himself upward and over into the nearest seat, undid the straps, and lifted the chair over and into the aisle. Within seconds he was in the unfolded metal chair, backing to the rear of the plane.

He stopped and looked closely at the crate.

Now he was certain of it. The long wooden box had not been touched. Its lashings were secure, as were the nails on the top of the crate. These nails were fake; the actual fastening devices were four screws set into the sides of the structure. But anyone trying to force open the crate wouldn't recognize that, wouldn't see where the stained plastic wood had covered the outside ends of the screws. You had to know.

Something else nobody else would know: the crate wasn't built to be opened from the outside—not unless the circumstances were very unusual. The four screws were designed to be pushed out easily by the one who was inside the crate . . . and inside the other wooden box within that crate.

The other wooden box filled with dark soil.

Harmon was satisfied that all was as it should be with the crate. There were only two more things for him to do before he concerned himself with the door to the outside. He was going to open it, that he knew. As to what he might find when he did open it, he did not know. Therefore—

He unfastened the lashings with little difficulty. Then—his eyes half-closed, his mind concentrated upon the white mental finger of energy

which instantaneously hovered over the small lever of the device buried under his ribcage. The pulsating finger moved. So did the lever.

Dracula was free—or would be, as soon as darkness came.

Then, in the darkness, the screws would be pushed out from within, and the vampire king would rise—

And face—

What?

The question in Harmon's mind was punctuated with a crash to his right.

The door of the aircraft was now open, the bright glare of the snow making the professor's eyes half close again. But only for a moment.

For a moment a thick shadow blocked the opening.

The shadow of a *yeti*.

Harmon's fingers were already touching the butt of the .38 under the chair when he decided it was no go. The *yeti* had scrambled into the interior of the plane. That was reason enough, but there was a second reason.

Namely, the voice, hollow but recognizable as that of Ka-Zadok, which suddenly filled the aircraft interior:

"Do not struggle, Professor. I am having you brought to me. It is time we had an audience, you and I."

"Professor . . ." Ka-Zadok looked down at the man in the wheelchair before him. "Professor . . .

Tell me, just what is it you profess, Damien Harmon?"

It was the giant's opening line, the first statement he made to the man who, wheelchair and all, had been placed in the center of the shimmering room some twenty yards square. There was little furniture in the room, except for the ice-like throne upon which the magician relaxed. A drapeless window was set in one wall. The rest of the room was blank, colorless wall and floor—exceedingly empty and smooth as glass.

No, not quite. On the silver-blank canvas of the room there was the play of golden-red beams which emanated from the late afternoon sun.

It was impossible! From the first moment Harmon had been lifted, chair and all, from the plane and had seen the outside, that had been the thought in his mind. The castle—the high-spired castle—it was inconceivable. Yet—

Had he not had evidence that the title of magician was once *earned* by the giant who now sat before him? The giant who, seemingly irritated by Harmon's failure to respond, now repeated this question:

"I asked you what it is you profess, Professor."

Harmon smiled. "That depends on the circumstances. Right now, I would submit that it depends on the person to whom I'm doing the professing."

Ka-Zadok laughed. "Well said, Professor Harmon. You are much more of a nobleman than your young assistant."

"Cam?" Harmon asked seriously. "Is he—"

"He is alive at the moment. I repeat—at the moment. The woman you know as Ktara believes she protects him. I have no reason to disabuse her of that belief, not yet. You, however, are under no such protection."

"No?" Harmon wondered whether he should push. He had no idea regarding the relative safety of Cam and Ktara. All he knew was that it was still afternoon. Until the setting of the sun, it was up to Ktara, Cam, and himself to handle things. And since he did not know the status of the first two, it looked like he was on his own.

"No?" he repeated. "I think you're wrong. I think that at this moment she is in one way protecting me."

Ka-Zadok nodded. "You refer to your ability to breathe in this rarified atmosphere. Yes, that is correct. It is the skill of the woman which allows you this luxury. Yet I see that you are not entirely trustful of her skill."

Harmon looked at the oxygen equipment on his lap. When the *yeti* had begun to lift the wheelchair out of the plane, Harmon had grasped the straps and held onto the unit for dear life. The action had been totally reflexive, even though, moments afterward, he remembered that the straps had been fastened to his wrists when he awoke from his unconsciousness. That had been done for a good reason, he knew. Call it ESP, call it anything you wanted, Harmon believed in *instinct*, his label for a lot of things—feelings—which defied rational explanation.

"Trustful," he said, repeating Ka-Zadok's

word. "I trust a variety of powers, Ka-Zadok. Beyond all of them, I trust my own."

"Again, well said, Professor. Have you no desire to know why I have brought you here at this time?"

Harmon inclined his head. "Of course. But, of course, Ka-Zadok will tell me, will he not?"

Ka-Zadok laughed, this time what seemed to be a laugh of true amusement. "You are amazing, Professor Harmon. I know that you have seen many examples of the Dark World's influences over puny lives such as yours. I know that you have been in peril for your very life—many times. And yet you have the gall to sit there before me—you the helpless old cripple that you are, and I the man of power that I am, that *you know* I am—and you sit there in your wheeled contraption talking as if you were an equal to me! How do you account for your brazenness, Professor Harmon?"

"Age," Harmon replied. "If I die the next instant, I die having lived a full and rather exciting life. I can't ask for much more."

"You lie, Professor!" The Magician's face now was stern. "No one willingly dies."

Harmon nodded. "Quite true. But it is also quite true that no one—no, I should not speak for every man, just myself. What is truth is that I'd rather die right now—*right now*—than live one more minute in which I acted contrary to the beliefs which I have unwaveringly followed during my long years of existence on this planet."

"You think that bravery?"

Harmon laughed. "I call it the same thing you do. Foolishness."

Ka-Zadok rose as if struck. "How do *you* know what I call it? What are the limits of your *real* powers, old man?"

Harmon hesitated. Had he discovered something about the giant? Was there something the magician didn't know? That was, on the face of it, improbable. But still—

"Ka-Zadok, I am not a magician like yourself. Surely you know that."

"I know also that I cannot read the thoughts you have behind that metal disc."

Harmon smiled. "Must you read thoughts? Cannot you simply ask for the information you seem anxious to learn?"

Ka-Zadok sat down again. "Very well. There is but one question I have for you. What are the locations of the hoards of gold? I know of the one which is here. I know of one in a country called Brazil and another in a land known as Romania. This information I have gleaned from the mind of your assistant, the young Cameron Sanchez. I would like to know the other locations."

"In which case, you ask the wrong man. I know no more than what Cam's mind has told you."

"This Cam," the magician said slowly. "His mind is cloudy on one thing. The relationship between you and the Son of the Dragon. I know something of the one you call Dracula. I know that he never would submit to the kind of authority you seem to exercise over him. What I do not

know is—the source of that authority. How, Harmon—how do you control the Dragon's Son?"

Harmon laughed. While he did, things began to click in his mind. The Mongol had read Cam's mind, yes. But there obviously were certain things he did not get from his reading. Such as the relationship between himself and Dracula. Which meant that—

Of course.

If Ktara had blocked Cam's mind completely, the so-called magician might have been so fearful of her—and them—that he would have let the plane dash itself to fragments in the mountains. So she had done the correct thing. She had allowed Ka-Zadok to extract information from Cam's thoughts, she had allowed him to learn new things—such as what Cam knew of the locations of the vampire's hoards of gold. But she had blocked the key pieces of data—those which, should the Mongol be aware of them, might spell disaster to—

To whom? For whom was she concerned? Harmon? Or Cam? Or even herself? No, probably none of them. It was no doubt the fate of her Master which concerned her.

"Do you not listen to me, Professor?" the Mongol now asked. "If I wish, I could have my answers from you easily. Through subtle torture—and *unsubtle* torture as well—I could have you pleading to tell me what I desire to know. I could destroy that mind behind your metal plate. In a blink of an eye I could burn it to gray ash. Or I

could leave it untouched—and destroy it with madness. What is your preference?”

“My preference,” Harmon said quietly. His preference. He had no doubt that the magician could do as he boasted. Yet if he told the Mongol what he wanted to know, he would be dead in any case. Such an easy way to triumph over his enemy would not be overlooked—even though Ka-Zadok had not tampered with the crate which held Dracula’s body. No, at this time Ka-Zadok thought in terms of a struggle between equals, perhaps an honorable struggle. But when the moment came in which he recognized the superior power of the Dark One, then he would lash out with any weapon he had. And that easily could spell the end for Harmon.

Of course, this logic was based upon the assessment that Dracula *was* superior to the giant. Suppose that were not the case?

He smiled. That too would be the end of Harmon.

The smile did not go unnoticed by the figure on the throne before him. “I have said something amusing?”

“In a way, yes,” Harmon replied. “You speak of my preference when you know full well that I am in no position to exercise it.”

“Very well, Professor.” The giant rose. “I have decided your fate. You have set your will in opposition to mine. Let us see just how strong that will of yours is, how long it holds out before you shout with all your will what I have required of you. For you will speak to me, Professor Har-

mon, and I shall listen—with ears which will hear regardless of where I may be. Let me first strip away from your eyes one illusion you suffer.”

It was no sooner said than done. Harmon no longer was sitting in a castle room. There was no longer any castle. The professor's chair was now in the center of what at first appeared to be the multifanged mouth of some huge snow creature. It was, he saw now, a grotto, white and sharp stalactites and stalagmites above him and surrounding his chair.

“I asked you,” Ka-Zadok said mockingly, “what it was that you professed, Professor. No doubt, one answer you might have made was that you profess the truth. Now, then, you see the truth. But there is more truth to see. Look upward. Do you notice anything unusual above you?”

Harmon looked. He wasn't sure, but—

“Truth, Professor Harmon. The roof of this cave is slowly descending. Very slowly. Though you may try, there is no place within your confines where you can escape one of those sharp points.”

Yes, it *was* true. Harmon could see the slight downward movement now. He looked anxiously at his watch.

“You check the time? Oh, you have much time before one of those points begins to enter your skull or the back of your neck—or that point of your groveling body which finally is caught as you crawl for escape. Plenty of time. Your eyes

will strain trying to see just how much more time you have. You'll see."

Ka-Zadok laughed. "Or perhaps you won't see. But shall there not be other sensations? Shall not the other illusions of sense be stripped from you as well? Yes, Harmon, you should *feel* as well."

The blast of cold which gripped Harmon's skin made him shudder from the base of his spine. He looked to the oxygen mask.

"That will not be necessary, Professor. I would not have your mind losing consciousness. A thought which gives me pause. The extreme cold might well cause that reaction, might it not?"

Harmon didn't answer. There are times when silence is the better ploy, and this, he was certain, was one of them.

"I'm sure you'll agree," Ka-Zadok said, nodding. There was thoughtfulness on his face, but it was assuredly a sham. He was baiting his captive, Harmon knew. *Well, dammit, let's get it over with!*

Harmon no sooner formed the thought when he wished he hadn't. For at that moment Ka-Zadok's "solution" to his "problem" appeared before the professor's eyes.

"Warmth," the Mongol said triumphantly. "Yes—this will supply you with all the warmth you will need. Perhaps more."

The echo of Ka-Zadok's laugh faded. Whether he was still in the room or not Harmon couldn't tell. His eyes were tightly closed. He could not stand to look at the thing—the horrible thing which had appeared on the cave floor before him.

It was pale yellow . . . hairless . . . its flesh soft and ringed like that of a worm. It looked itself to be half-eaten by worms. A fluid shapeless mass, the thing was, with no eyes but a gaping black hole which might serve the thing for a mouth.

It was through that mouth—in the instant before Harmon shut his eyelids tight—that the warmth Ka-Zadok had promised battered the professor's face. His face and his nostrils

The stench of the thing was awful. Harmon was beginning to retch when another sense came into play. He now heard the thing. Not only its wheezing, hot breathing, but other sounds. Harmon forced his eyes open.

And heard the sound of his own cry in his ears as he again shut his eyes tightly.

At the base of the mass were pale pink suction-cup feet, fifty or more of them. They were guiding the monster close to the same objective toward which the spiked ceiling was being guided.

Directly toward Damien Harmon.

CHAPTER 11

The gray crystal, that which held the white fire, spoke to the helmeted Mongol who knelt before it:

“You show concern, Ka-Zadok. Concern which borders upon fear.”

“That is true, Mighty One,” the giant said. “This Professor Harmon—”

“He is not the cause of your fear. You have neutralized him. But for your wish to cause terror within him—a wish of vanity—you would have destroyed him outright. Why did you not do so?”

“I—I could not.”

“From fear?”

“No. I do not know why I could not. Something . . . something seemed to dissuade me strongly. I thought that perhaps you—”

“We gave no such mental command.”

“The woman, then? This Ktara—”

“You judge her to be of greater power than yourself?”

Ka-Zadok spoke uncertainly. “She . . . she

claims to protect the old priest and the young warrior. Perhaps she protects the professor as well. Perhaps she entered my mind somehow, twisted my thoughts, so that I could not destroy him. You must tell me—what is the hold which the man has upon the Dragon's Son?"

"We know nothing of this Harmon, nor of his assistant. They have interfered once before with our plans, in league with your ancient enemy,* but we have not touched their minds."

"*Touch* their minds, then! I shall take you to the professor—or to the others. You can then learn of those things which they hide from me!"

The crystal pulsed, then blazed anew. "There is no need for that. They hide nothing of importance to us. Nothing they know will be of importance to us—once you learn the locations of the stored gold."

"The gold!" Ka-Zadok snarled. "I have told you of two additional locations—"

"There are more," the voice from the crystal insisted. "There must be several more."

"But is it not more important to destroy the one we both hate? Of what use will all his gold be when he no longer exists?"

"You *fool!*"

The intensity of the second word moved the kneeling Mongol back a full knee-scraping pace. When the voice resumed, it was strangely calm.

"It is the gold which can be used to impede our

*See *Dracula's Disciple*

progress. Once the locations are known, all of it can be destroyed. Already, forces have been set into motion to destroy the two locations identified to us—in addition to this high-mountain location. But unless all the gold is destroyed, the threat remains. There is always the possibility that our enemy has imparted to someone else the knowledge of how to use the gold, how to fashion the weapon which he twice tried to use against us—”

“The woman—she must know. Perhaps the two men also!”

“Perhaps. And perhaps others as well. But that is none of your concern. You have been awakened for a purpose, Ka-Zadok. That purpose is to learn the hiding places of the Dragon’s gold.”

“My purpose is to destroy the fiend—”

“*Must* we make our reminder stronger, Magician?”

The Mongol’s face went white with terror. “No—please . . . I—”

“You,” the voice from within the burning crystal said heavily, “you will do as we say. The woman—Ktara, as she now calls herself—she may have the information we desire. She has been with him from the beginning. It is our *suggestion*, Magician, that you question her. Or do you still doubt that your powers equal hers?”

“I would bring the gray crystal ball with me, Glorious One.”

“No!”

“But why—”

“You will do as we command. You will leave us

now, Ka-Zadok—you will depart and question the woman. We shall hear her responses—from where we are. Then you will do what you will with our enemy. But make haste, Magician, for the hours of the day grow ever later.”

The fire within the gray globe suddenly died. There was no reason for Ka-Zadok to continue the conversation.

Rattled as the magician was when he left the place of the globe, he had regained most of his composure by the time he kicked open the door of the temple.

The three of them sat cross-legged at a wooden table before the golden altar, drinking tea—drinking tea!

As if nothing of importance had happened to them this day—as if right now his presence were no more than a slight annoyance.

It was the woman who greeted him:

“Ka-Zadok, Warrior and Magician. You should not tarry here, even though the tea be plentiful and though you are welcome to a thousand cupfuls. Darkness is not far away, and you should be about more urgent business.”

“Silence, *bitch*!” Ka-Zadok strode to the small tea table and, with a mighty kick, sent cups and contents scattering to the floor in fragments.

The three remained as they had been, sitting cross-legged. Each looked up at him with a curious smile. As if they suspected he had lost his wits.

"You are insane, the three of you!" he bel-
lowed. "Do you not realize—"

Again it was Ktara: "Do *you* not realize that you waste time with us—precious time, Magician?"

"You, on your part, do not realize what I have done with your professor."

Ka-Zadok saw that the young warrior's expression changed, that he was in fact about to rise. But a look from the woman froze him where he sat. There was no doubt in the Mongol's mind that it was she who was in command here, complete command. He addressed her sharply:

"You will tell me quickly—what are the locations of your Master's gold? If you do not do as I command, I will kill these two, your friend and the old priest."

"I will tell you nothing," Ktara replied. "And you cannot kill either of these two. They are under my protection."

The Mongol smiled. "Are they? Let us see!"

His hand reached to the great sword which hung from his belt. None of them moved as he unsheathed the steel weapon, although the old priest's eyes followed the movement. Ka-Zadok considered which of the two men he would destroy first. The young, disrespectful one—yes, him.

"You are a fighter. You fought off the steel of my men. Stand and see if you can ward off *my* steel!"

The one called Sanchez seemed to size up the

Mongol and his weapon; then he shrugged. "I see no need to stand," he said.

With a cry of rage, Ka-Zadok sliced his blade through the air on a horizontal plane calculated to leave Cam headless. Inches before blade met neck, it met something else—something invisible and hard.

With bell-like clangs, the blade broke into four jagged pieces.

Ka-Zadok dropped the handle of what was left of his sword to the floor. He mock-bowed to Ktara. "Very well. Your powers are sufficient to deal with the physical. Let us see how well they withstand other forces!"

His eyes narrowed. A beam of purple light shone from between his half-closed lids, a beam which darted to the place where the old man sat, which darted and shattered against the invisible barrier.

Unbelieving, the giant cast his eyes toward Cam. Again the purple beam lashed out—

Again it shattered inches before it reached its target.

Ka-Zadok stood as if stunned. "You—"

Ktara laughed. "Would you try some other type of weapon?"

"I cannot defeat you!"

"And it is not my place to attempt to defeat *you*, Magician. One with power greater than mine will do that this night."

"Greater than—"

"Much greater. You did not know that, did

you, Ka-Zadok? They lied to you about your enemy's strength, or more probably they said nothing of it at all."

Ka-Zadok's eyes were wild now. "No—I know your weakness. I know!" And so saying, he tore from his chest the leather hauberk which served as physical protection. The light of the fires within the temple glared from the device dangling about his neck. "*Cringe!*" Ka-Zadok commanded, thrusting the heavy metal cross toward Ktara.

She smiled. "That symbol has no meaning for me."

"Then—then it is only *him*! It will have meaning for him—and so will something else!"

His heel lifted and crashed downward on the overturned tea table. Reaching down, he straightened, showing the piece of wood he picked up from the floor.

"This should suit my purpose well, yes?" he said. Then he left, his hand clutching the three-foot length of wood.

The length of wood which had a very sharp point.

Cam now shot to his feet. "The professor. What has happened to—"

Ktara cut him off. "I will try to help him. For you, there is another job." She looked at his oxygen mask. "You will need that and warm clothes—and something else."

Cam picked up the straps of the oxygen mask and his revolver.

"That is not the something else I meant," the woman said. But she noted that his attention was now directed toward the still-open door—and the light entering through it.

The old priest had seen it as well.

"It fades, but does it fade quickly enough, my lady?"

She considered the question. "Perhaps I can do something about that as well."

Ka-Zadok did not like the way the sky was darkening. It was too early, too soon! Surely, the woman's powers did not include the ability to move the sun itself! No, he did not think so, but . . .

Like himself, she could create illusions. The illusions of storm clouds which could block the rays of the sun. And, if that were allowed to happen—

But what could he do?

Whatever he did, he must do it quickly! For what was perhaps the third time that day, he had the feeling of failure—and the dread of what might await him if he did in fact fail. He must hurry, even more so now that the failing light . . .

With great strides the Mongol ran, one hand clutching the stake of wood and the other the iron cross. He did not have much distance to cover, but by the time he reached the aircraft, the sky was bluish-black. The storm that was coming, whether natural or magically induced, was going to be serious. That was certain. And as

he stopped suddenly, several feet from the open hatchway in the side of the plane, something else was certain.

He could go no further.

It was another invisible barrier. Obviously placed by the woman!

Inside that plane, he knew, was the casket of the fiend he hated, the dreaded one he must destroy. He gave no thought now to the matter of proper challenge and fair battle. This Son of the Dragon was more powerful than he had thought. The woman was right—the Old Ones had deceived him. They had given him no help, none at all, so why should he—

The thought froze in his mind. They had given him no help. None. Why?

They had helped him when he'd turned Qua Siem's dreamer into a hairy monster in the home of Harmon. As he knelt before that gray crystal, they had fed power into his mind so that the woman was powerless to act against the creature. It was only when the Dragon's Son appeared that they shrank back—and the creature was destroyed. But they *had* helped him. Why not now?

And then he knew why not now.

They couldn't. They couldn't help him—and they couldn't harm him, either. Not unless he was within the physical presence of that flashing gray sphere!

He laughed. They could scream all they wanted, threaten him all they wanted, but the matter of the hiding places of the gold was

closed. That was no longer of any importance—no, the important thing was that the enemy be destroyed. And that he would do.

The barrier. He probed it with his mental powers. It was strong, yes. Strong enough so that he could not break through it, not with all his force. Unless . . .

There is no one trained in the Magical Arts who does not know that, regardless of one's expanse of power, whatever power one has is limited. Thus, to use one's strength in one area—for example, a continuing illusion—took from the total power just that much strength available for other effects.

The barrier.

It was strong, but it could be weakened. If—

If the woman were forced to use her strength elsewhere. If the darkening sky were the result of her efforts, that sapped some of her strength. On his part—

His eyes flickered toward the mighty castle, which still loomed high in the dark sky. In an instant the castle was gone. It had not taken much of his power to sustain the illusion, but still—

He turned back to the invisible wall protecting the aircraft. A bolt of light flashed from his eyes—

And shattered against the woman's shield.

Ka-Zadok grinned.

The shield had won that attack, but it wouldn't win the next. For the very good reason that, by

that time, the woman would be using a few more of her powers.

Beginning now.

Cam took the thing Ktara gave him. He looked at it with wonder. She had not allowed either him or the priest to see what she was doing in the corner of the temple, but when she returned to the firelight, she had the thing with her.

"What do I use this for?" he asked.

She told him. "Sight of it will divert Ka-Zadok when next you meet. To the top of the mountain, that is where you should go. I have the feeling that—"

She stopped her speech. "The castle," she said. "It's gone." Cam was about to ask her how she could see that, but then realized that she had *eyes* different from and better than his. "And the warriors, they too are gone. Ka-Zadok tries to—"

Again she stopped. "Listen!"

This time Cam didn't need her ears to hear what she heard. Nor did the priest:

"*Avalanche!*" Qua Siem cried. "The worst I've ever heard! The temple will be crushed and buried."

"No," Ktara said, her voice one of concern. "I can protect the temple. But it's checkmate."

"Checkmate?" Cam asked.

"A chess term, Mr. Sanchez."

"I know it's a chess term, but what the hell do you mean?"

She now was facing the direction of the ever-

increasing roar of falling snow. "I mean that Ka-Zadok has won this battle."

"And the war?" Cam asked quietly.

"I'm . . . not sure," she whispered.

Cam put a hand on hers. "In that case, don't let's call it checkmate."

She smiled up at him. "Check, then."

"Check."

CHAPTER 12

Eyes closed tightly, Harmon clenched his teeth so hard he thought they would crack under the pressure. His mind grasped hold of that thought. His teeth. Yes, strain the ears to try to hear the calcium crack . . . strain the senses to feel the pain. . . .

The pain. He had tried other methods of inducing pain. For a time he had attempted to send the nails of his fist-clenched fingers into the fleshy parts of his palms. He had cursed himself for his too-neat manicure; the nails wouldn't even break the skin. At one point he considered breaking a finger bone—but no, that much pain might be too much; it might take him over the border separating sanity from insanity. Even now it was dangerously close.

The teeth, then. Yes, try that . . . try anything which would focus his mind. Focus it away from—

That horrible thing, that monster which was too close, almost smothering him in the confines of his chair, breathing its foul breath into Harmon's own nostrils—that, and worse.

Tightly as his eyes were shut, there was a part of Harmon's mind which wanted him to open them—to see just where those daggers of death now hung, to see how long he had to live. And there was something else he wanted to see. His wristwatch. The time—how long had it been since the Mongol had left? Was it dark yet? He had to *know*, he had to *see*!

But he didn't dare. He was sure his nerves could not stand another sight of that terror. He had chanced opening his eyes three times since Ka-Zadok had gone. The first two times he checked the downward progress of the stalactites, progress he only could guess at even as he viewed their sharp points. Because he couldn't keep his eyes open all that long. He was screaming as he shut them.

The third time was different. He remembered the pistol under the seat of the chair. He had not used the weapon on the *yeti* who had carried him from the plane because he'd thought it useless to do so. But now—useless or not—it was something he could do, at least *something*. He unclipped the weapon.

Even with his eyes shut he knew precisely where the face of the creature was—the progress of the warm stench was roadmap enough. Snapping the pistol up into position, he emptied the chamber of all six shots. The echoes thundered into Harmon's ears; then there was silence.

He opened his eyes then.

And shrieked again.

He blacked out the sight even before he'd seen

whether or not the bullets had had any effect upon the monster. That mattered little, he knew, because if there had been any effect it was much too slight to make a difference. The hot breath was on him again—and it came even closer.

Closer. . . .

He thought his mind would snap when the thing touched the bottom of the chair, moving it slightly. *My legs! It's got my legs!* Yet he couldn't say for sure whether that was the case. It was in one sense a blessing that he had no feeling in his lower extremities. It was in another sense a curse. He didn't *know*—and he didn't know what the thing might be doing to him. A vision of being eaten alive—from the legs upward—flickered through his mind, a vision that he dismissed with a racking shudder. It was then that he wished that he hadn't fired all the bullets at the monster. He knew what he would be tempted to do if he had just one of those bullets left.

And then he was glad that he did not have that one bullet. Damien Harmon prided himself on not ever having taken the coward's way out of anything. He was, he'd told himself on other occasions, too old and ornery to change that habit of a lifetime. But if he had that bullet now . . .

The temptation might be too much for his mind to take.

But something had to happen soon—it *had* to. His sanity was ready to snap, he knew that only too well. Was this what Ka-Zadok wanted?

No. He wanted the answer to his question. And

thus this torture, which, Harmon had to admit, was ingenious. Well, to hell with Ka-Zadok!

Easier said than done—right, Harmon?

And then he felt the suckers on his hands—the thing *was* crawling up his body!

He cried out, this time as loud as he could and for as long as he could so that the sound would hurt his throat, so that it might cause him pain which might take his mind off the horror which—

Pain. Yes! Pain, immediate pain, would divert his attention. If the pain was intense enough and if he could concentrate all of his mind upon it.

How long he screamed he had no way of knowing, but he stopped when the pain was so acute that he was fearful of ripping a vocal cord. It was then that he thought of his fingernails—a failure—after which he dismissed the idea of breaking a bone. And then he began grinding his teeth.

At that point he felt the suction-cup feet of the thing upon his chest. It was moving up, ever higher....

Lord—if it touches my face!

At that horrible thought, he remembered the mask. The oxygen mask which even now was on his lap. He had forgotten it, thinking he had no need for it. But he needed it now, not for air supply but for facial protection. He moved his right hand toward the place where the unit rested.

His fingers stopped long before they reached their objective.

They stopped when they sank into the soft ooze which hovered over the yielding suckers.

Gagging uncontrollably, Harmon felt his stomach tighten with such force it almost doubled him over. As his head jerked forward, his face brushed—

Something hot—hot and clammy and—

Vocal cords or not, Harmon screamed—

And slumped back into the chair.

His heart was pounding now with such force and at such speed that fear—fear of the vital organ's sudden failure—replaced the feeling of total revulsion which had permeated his being. This new source of terror—the terror of impending death—was something, however, that Harmon could handle. With renewed strength, he concentrated his full mental powers on the beating of his heart, the throbbing of the blood in his ears. His breathing now was controlled, slowing . . . slowing. . . . His hands relaxed their tense grip on the chair.

Slowly . . . easily. . . . Harmon's concentration upon his physical processes returned them to normalcy. There was even a change in the heat of his body—it seemed cooler now. Cooler—even to the point of being cold.

He shivered. This wasn't expected! How could he suddenly—

Unless—

It was possible. There no longer seemed to be anything touching his skin. The stench which had poisoned his nostrils seemed to be gone as well. If what *seemed* to be the case actually *was*—

He opened his eyes slowly, then opened them to the full.

He was alone in the ice cave. And the roof—

Although the tips of the frozen daggers were dangerously close—less than four feet above his head—he was sure of it: They no longer were descending.

Was it over? Was Ka-Zadok finished? Had Dracula—

He looked at his wristwatch. Six-ten. In a shudder from the cold, he sat back against the chair. Was it possible? It seemed much too early, and the sun had been bright, the sky clear, yet that could change . . . or perhaps Ktara had dealt with the Mongol somehow on her own. Maybe it was all over, he thought to himself as he rubbed his arms. At any moment now, they might be coming to release him from this icy tomb. They'd better hurry, he reflected. If they waited too long, it was just possible they'd find him frozen solid.

Under a sky which was now purple-black, Ka-Zadok's eyes concentrated upon the invisible shield which blocked him from the aircraft. The sound of the continuing avalanche was as music to his ears as the bright light flashed from his eyes. It had cost him but a small spurt of his power to start the movement of white death toward the temple, but it would take the woman continuing strength to keep the temple from being buried. Also he had recaptured those amounts of energy needed to maintain the castle and the old professor's torture. So that now—

The shield went with a sound like shattering glass.

Still Ka-Zadok did not move forward. He stood as if made of stone, mentally searching out the space between himself and the open hatchway and then feeling out the interior of the aircraft.

There was nothing. The woman no doubt had felt that the one protective device would be enough. The Mongol smiled and stepped forward. In three strides he was at the entrance, and in another two he crouched by the side of the wooden crate. His eyes blazing with fire, his vision took him inside the outer crate and then inside the more elaborately decorated casket where his enemy lay, eyelids shut.

The cursed Son of the Dragon!

Dropping the iron cross, the Mongol lifted in both hands the stake which had been part of the tea table back at the temple. For an instant he was intent on doing nothing other than what he had come for—sending that sharp-pointed shaft through the heart of the hated one. But the instant passed, and rationality returned to Ka-Zadok, who realized that there were two-inch layers of wood between stake and target. It was at the moment of his realization that something happened to the face of the one within the casket.

The eyes opened. The mouth of the devil shifted from its previous expression of restful composure to something else—

Amusement.

He was amused!

Rage in his heart, Ka-Zadok retrieved the large

metal cross from the floor of the plane. Holding it in his left hand, the fingers of his right tore loose the thick straps which lashed the crate in place. Next—in one splintering rip—came the top of the crate itself. Ka-Zadok snapped the cross before his own face—directly between his face and the top of the casket.

“Let us see now just who will be amused!” he spit out savagely.

And now, cautiously, he began to raise the lid of the coffin—not with either of his hands, but with his mind, because he needed both hands. One for the cross, the other for the stake which even now was poised above the rising lid for the downward strike. “Son of the Dragon,” the Mongol said in triumph, “I bring you the symbol which is your soul’s bane—and the wood which is the nemesis of your heart!”

And then with a sudden effort, the Magician crashed open the lid.

The shriek was deafening—not that of Ka-Zadok, although he too cried out. But the first came from within the casket. A high-pitched shriek, not that of a man, which was natural, perhaps—

Because there was no man within the casket.

The wings of the huge bat beat the air frantically as it passed over the cringing Mongol, who still had not recovered from the sight of the fierce red eyes of the creature he did not expect to find within the coffin. Before Ka-Zadok did recover some semblance of sense, the bat no longer was inside the plane. Its beating wings had

carried it, the echo of its cry still audible to the Mongol, high and on a course toward the Great Mountain.

"So be it!" Ka-Zadok said with a scowl, heaving the wooden stake to the front of the passenger compartment. With his freed hand he tore loose the remaining parts of the crate which surrounded the casket. As he did so, his eyes smiled at the rich earth which the white satin interior contained.

"So be it, Dark One. The stake does not claim you, but the cross has driven you from me. This very night will I drive you from me the final time."

He closed the coffin lid, then heaved the container of the dead to the hatchway. In a matter of moments he was striding toward the mountain, the casket resting on his huge right shoulder.

"This night, Dark One, is your last," he said, speaking as if to the mountain itself. "For it is this night in which the fierce winds at the top of the world scatter the precious earth of your daylight resting place. Unless—"

He held the iron cross before him boldly.

"Unless you wish to challenge me!"

With a deep laugh, the Mongol pointed the cross toward the Great Mountain. The outlines of the high-spired castle reappeared. Yes, he now could restore it, the drain on his powers not all that crucial now. He could restore the castle—

And other things, too.

At the sound of the new rumble above them, Ktara's eyes flashed at Cam. "We must leave *now*! There is no time for delay. You know what you are to do—"

Cam nodded. He knew what he was to *try* to do.

Her words for the old priest were short and to the point. "Go with Mr. Sanchez until you are clear of the falling snow. Then head for the airplane. You will be safe there."

"And you?" Cam said. "What will you be doing?"

"Professor Harmon," she replied. "He is in need of me."

As Cam, his gear in hand and followed by Qua Siem, went through the temple door, he assumed Ktara knew what she was talking about. The professor needed her, she had said. She had *not* said anything at all about what kind of trouble Harmon was in.

And, wild as Cam's imagination sometimes was, he could not have imagined Harmon's position. For his half-frozen employer had just—that moment—received a blast of reviving heat.

The time of respite was over, and things were now as they had been before.

Steeling himself, Harmon did not cry out this time, not even when he felt the suckers of the thing touch his throat and face.

CHAPTER 13

The winds were rising in their fury by the time the Mongol reached the highest balcony of his castle. As he had expected, there was someone waiting for him.

The black-cloaked figure stood at the very end of the balcony—some twenty feet from where Ka-Zadok now stopped.

“You would wish, of course, to witness your end,” the giant said.

The other’s tone did not seem overly concerned. “You speak with much confidence, Magician. Much as you spoke when we first met.”

“I know more about you now,” the Mongol said.

“And perhaps you have learned something more about Them?”

“The Old Ones? They have allied themselves with me.”

The Son of the Dragon laughed. “They ally themselves with no one. They use you, Magician, that is all. When you are of no further use to them, you will be discarded—destroyed, as you have destroyed others.”

“As I will destroy you!”

“Without first discovering that which the Old Ones wish to learn? That is not in keeping with the instructions given to you. That will make them angry, Ka-Zadok. Perhaps you do not know how these allies of yours will react when they are angry. Or perhaps you do. I notice that you have not availed yourself of their strength in this final battle of ours, that you keep the gray sphere in which their messengers came quite hidden beneath the mountain surface. Why is that, Magician? Are you fearful to gaze upon that crystal globe?”

Ka-Zadok sneered. “I have no need for their powers to defeat you. I hold your defeat in my own two hands. You, on your part, might better have arranged to have your allies here—the woman, she might have been able to control the currents of the air which will scatter your precious bed-soil over the leagues of this frozen world.”

“The woman is occupied—with more important matters.”

“Professor Harmon!” Ktara said. Her voice sounded as if it came from within the great ice hall, but it sounded too as if it came from far away.

“Help me!” Harmon gasped. The suckers of the monster were all over him now—his face, his hair, his throat, all over the top part of his body and his arms as well. There was no physical pain,

but the nausea was almost unbearable. "Ktara—help me!"

"I can do little to comfort you, Professor. The creature breathes fire—which makes my powers useless against it."

"The roof—the sharp ends. Where—"

"They are close, Professor. Do not open your eyes."

"Can . . . can you stop them?"

"No. I thought I might be able to. I thought that Ka-Zadok would need the strength he uses to maintain this effect, but I was wrong. He feels he needs none of his artful power to defeat my master. The strength of what he has done here is more than I can defeat."

"Can you at least help me get out of here? You got in somehow."

"Through a small opening—too small for you even to crawl through, Professor. No. There is nothing I can do. If I could enter your mind, my thoughts could take your thoughts from your present situation. But I cannot do that. Your barrier . . ."

She paused. Harmon said. "I know. Thank you for doing what you can." He knew precisely why she had come. Or he thought he knew. She wanted to be here. Because she felt something for him? If so, what was it she felt? That question, he knew, was unanswerable; it probably always would be. Yet she had come, to do what she could, little as it was. No, already the magic of her presence had begun to have its effects. He was thinking of other things—things other than—

"Please," he said. "Keep talking. Your Master—"

"The darkness has fallen. It is an especially dark sky, Professor."

"Then all rests in his hands."

She did not reply immediately. "In his, yes. To a lesser degree in mine. And to a greater degree in those of Mr. Sanchez."

"The young warrior—and the old cripple," Ka-Zadok said. "I do not entirely understand why they are in league with you. The young one, he follows the dictates of the older one, but that one—I cannot pierce his mind. Even at this very moment, while he awaits certain death in circumstances horrible enough to crack even the strongest mind, he endures."

The red lips of the white-faced vampire curled into a smile. "He has accepted your challenge, Ka-Zadok. Is that not what you wanted? To challenge and have it accepted."

"By *you*!"

A mock bow. "I have accepted as well. I am here, Magician."

Ka-Zadok's tone was suddenly almost hysterical. "And you think I am dishonorable? You think that the means by which I destroy you are a sign of weakness?"

"I have not said that, Mongol."

"No, you have not. And it would make no difference if you had! It is the triumphant warrior who knows his enemy's weaknesses and uses

them ruthlessly. *These* are your weaknesses, Dragon's Son. The cross which will not allow you to approach me, the symbol which nullifies whatever spell you might conjure up to slay me—and the earth in this box. They form your doom!”

“And him? What doom does he form—and whose?”

Ka-Zadok followed the red eyes of his enemy downward. There on another balcony a short distance below and outward from where he and the Dragon's Son stood was the figure of Cam Sanchez. A curious figure, but one which concerned Ka-Zadok not at all.

The magician laughed. “Let him be the first to receive the wind-driven earth!”

With that, the giant raised the great casket over his head. It was obvious by the direction he faced that his intention was to use the heavy box for two purposes, one of which was to batter the young warrior from the balcony and dash him to the earth below. It should have been obvious even to the intended victim, yet as the victim looked upward he appeared unconcerned. Instead—

He was cocking back his right arm, shouting something.

The Son of the Dragon laughed. “In case you didn't hear him, he said, *Catch!*”

Ka-Zadok's arm froze as his face screwed up in uncertainty. Then his features unfroze as he saw—with terror—the thing which the man below him had thrown. The thing which now was arching up directly toward him.

The climb had not been easy for Cam. The higher he moved, the more the cold penetrated his heavy clothing. The biting wind which roared in his ears also made his vision difficult, but the howling din around him was welcome in one real sense. It muffled the bark of the big Magnum which seemed now to be frozen to the thick leather glove which covered Cam's left hand. As for his vision, that already was distorted due to the oxygen mask.

Ktara had insisted he wear it. Her explanation, though simple enough, was difficult to believe. Yet he now understood why she had urged him to keep the mask with him at all times. She had reminded him of the shooting star which had begun the current adventure, how it had been seen by many with the naked eye, and how it had not registered on any mechanical or electronic tracking device.

"It was not an illusion," she said. "It was real enough—but the *kind* of event it was could not filter through the lenses of the most sensitive telescope. In the case of the telescope, it was the treatment their glass itself received."

The lenses of the facepiece of the oxygen mask were similarly treated—"For glare," Cam reminded her; but the *reason for* treatment made no difference, she said.

"And the great towers of Ka-Zadok's creation are of the same nature as the sphere of the Old Ones. They have been fashioned from the mountain itself—therefore you must be aware of them *and* the mountain."

Cam was not long in understanding why. What Ka-Zadok had created, he easily could destroy. To find yourself on one of those "real" towers, and then to find it suddenly disappear—that was a straight route to death hundreds of feet below. Yet you couldn't afford to concentrate just on where the solid mountain terrain was, either. Because, for the present, the created towers were just as solid—as were the created Persian warriors which Cam would have to snake his way through. The solution, although not entirely satisfactory, was at least workable.

The right eyepiece of the mask was taken out.

Thus Cam had a strange visual world, a double landscape to interpret at all times. The sorting out was not easy, but there was one method he quickly discovered which helped. The closing of either eye would keep the second landscape and its data outside his brain.

Keeping his feet on "natural" terrain, then, he moved upward, the winds howling around him, the whipping snow from the ground hiding his movements—for the most part.

The soldiers of Ka-Zadok, fortunately, did not have much better vision than Cam had. In one respect theirs was worse, especially when the lower walls of the castle drew near. Once he sighted one or more of the soldiers, Cam could arrange his route to keep *real* ground between himself and their vision. Even so, he was surprised more times than was healthy during his ascent.

Twice he gunned down startled Persians who materialized no more than five feet from him. A

third time, the big Magnum exploded inches from the target's face—the moment Cam discovered that face before him. He used the revolver once more before the action of the weapon failed—frozen in place. It took Cam a full minute to pry the pistol from his glove; then he let it drop into the knapsack on his back. From here on, he'd have to depend on other weapons.

And he was going to need them. The higher into the mountain reaches Cam climbed, the more numerous were the soldiers and the closer together they were clustered. Fortunately, he was able to avoid the larger groups, but there still were details of two or three which stood in his way. He had, for the most part, the advantage of surprise. Thus the first group of two he fell upon had no defenses for the leather-wrapped hand-blades which caught one in the side of the head and the other in the windpipe. The next group of two were skewered where they stood at attention with the spears the first group no longer needed. With spear and sword and with hands and feet, Cam slaughtered the Persian impediments on his steady climb upward. Only twice was he spotted before he had sighted the enemy.

The first time, the attack came from directly above. Cam was skirting a low wall when a dark patch of motion disturbed the whistling snow over his head. He whirled in time to plant his sword into the chest of the first leaping Persian, but the second knocked Cam sprawling. As his back touched the cold earth, he rolled—just barely in time to move from the place where a

long spear buried itself in the ground. Launching an attack in spite of snow-blurred vision, Cam crashed into the soldier before the other had a chance to unsheath his sword. The Persian's back was broken in two quick jerks.

The second surprise could have been much more deadly. This attack came from directly in front of Cam, but the telltale blur wasn't at all discernable—not until the sound of pounding feet drew Cam's attention to what was coming at him. Even then he did not see his opponent until it was almost on top of him, because there was no clear distinction between the white snow before him and the white hair—

Of the *yeti*!

There was no time to think, only time to act. Instinctively, Cam dropped to his right knee and, with both hands, drove a Persian short sword upward toward the chest of the creature. As it thrust up hard-fast to the hilt, Cam combined that motion with a turn and upthrust of his own body. For a split second the snowman was balanced on the Puerto Rican's shoulder and back. Then it was over and down, its arms and legs flailing as its body crashed and then rolled and rolled again. The sounds of contact with the snow disappeared in the wind, but Cam envisioned a hairy snowball rolling helplessly down to the bottom of the mountain. It was a pleasant thought, but not one to dwell on.

As he turned upward again, he moved a little faster, just in case. Also just in case, he paused periodically—to be certain there were no black

claws of death within striking distance behind him.

His breathing began to get more difficult now and he considered putting the oxygen equipment into service. But he decided to let it wait. Not because he didn't feel it necessary. It was because he now had something else to think about.

There was a sudden lull in the wind. Where at one moment the space ahead of him had been filled with white movement, at the next moment it was totally clear.

He dropped flat to the ground, not daring to move a muscle, except those controlling his eyes. His heart almost stopped beating when he saw what he saw.

He was close to the edge of a ledge beyond which was a deep chasm. If he had moved another yard in the same direction he had been heading, the feeling of freefall would have been the last to register in his mind—or the second to the last, maybe, the last being the abrupt end to that fall. But the crevice was only one of the sights which slammed into his mind. There were two others.

The first was the very tip of the mountain. He was no more than ten yards below the fabled Top of the World!

And on that peak at that very moment were two other beings.

Dracula and the Mongol giant!

The roar of the wind came again to Cam's ears, but the snow did not rise around him. His vision still was clear, as was the air between him

and the top of the mountain—or the high balcony, depending upon which eye Cam used. Using his right eye only, he saw that he too was flat on a high balcony, the edge of which came to within two feet of the edge of the “real” ledge. His heart pounding, he waited for the snow again to swirl; then he realized the truth.

The snow wasn’t going to swirl, not that snow around him at any rate. Directly behind him the wind and its howl were furious. They had been there all the time! It was just that he had moved from the one area into the other, from the furious into the clear. And now that he was here, there was no sense in wasting any time. He had arrived at target.

Slowly, with as little movement as possible, he drew the rucksack over his left shoulder. It seemed to take an eternity for the strap holding the flap to the main compartment to come free, but when it did, Cam reached inside and brought out the object Ktara had given him. Wrapping the gloved fingers of his right hand about the object, Cam slowly shoved the rucksack from him. He didn’t want anything encumbering his movements now.

His right arm was cocked back even before he stood. It was important, Ktara had said, that Ka-Zadok see him before Cam did what he had to do. Important, maybe—also maybe deadly. The giant could kill him with one pointed finger.

“That is true, Mr. Sanchez,” Ktara had said. “But then Ka-Zadok will have no finger available to point.”

Maybe, Cam now reflected. But he doubted the giant needed any pointing fingers.

Nonetheless, Cam was here now and the time had come. He was no sooner on his feet when he knew the giant had noticed him. Ka-Zadok seemed to be shouting something—and raising over his head the casket of Dracula.

“Catch!” Cam roared, and he threw with all his might—up on a high arc directly toward the looming Mongol—the thing Ktara had given him—

The dark gray crystal ball.

“Choose!” laughed the Son of the Dragon. “Choose between vengeance and power! There they are—the lords of the Dark World. They come to join us, Ka-Zadok. Perhaps to help you—perhaps to destroy you!”

The giant shrieked as the globe began its downward fall. His eyes frantically jerked from that to his enemy, his left hand thrusting the iron cross even closer to the still-laughing Lord of Darkness. Yet that laugh was mixed with agony as the Master’s symbol of nemesis came closer. Ka-Zadok took heart from that sign, but his own laugh still was unsure.

“Very well, Devil! I consign you to extinction!”

With that he thrust the casket from him, but his eyes could not look below. Now they were fastened to that dropping sphere. Agilely, he caught it with a big-handed grip. It was only then that he dared to look down and see—

The casket struck the balcony below—almost

directly in front of the man still standing there. It landed on one end—then it bounced—and then it slid on a flat side—

Directly toward the edge of the balcony—the edge of the deep chasm.

Ka-Zadok laughed in triumph. “Look!” he cried to the cringing vampire. Then he shouted at the crystal in his right hand. “Look, you Old Ones! I have destroyed—*No!*”

The scream was directed below. For even as the casket was on the brink of falling, more than half of it over the edge, two strong hands grappled to hold it in place.

Ka-Zadok’s eyes flashed. A bolt of pure white light darted downward—

And was shattered by another bolt before it reached its objective. The source of that second shaft of light was obvious.

“You!” Ka-Zadok sneered. “Your powers are great, but there is one thing they cannot affect!”

With that his left hand jerked back, then forward. And the iron cross which that hand clutched hurtled downward—

Downward through the protective barrier, slamming into the shoulders of Cam Sanchez.

It was enough. The contact drove Cam to the right side of the casket, ripping his left hand free from its grasp. For an instant the long death box teetered on the edge of the abyss; then it plummeted downward. Almost, but not quite, Cam went along for the ride.

Now Ka-Zadok’s chest puffed up in triumph. “You are finished, Son of the Dragon.” But the

triumphant look on his face was short-lived. It was all wrong . . . the Devil, standing tall now, was *smiling*!

"It is your finish, Magician. Yours, not mine." He spread his hands, and Ka-Zadok understood.

The cross! The only thing which had kept the Son of the Dragon under control was now gone from him—it had gone over the edge of the chasm with—

"Your casket! Still I lay claim to my victory! No matter what happens now—"

The eyes of the Master grew bright. "The casket? I fear that even there you have failed. The powers of my Ktara assure it a safe fall."

The heavy lips of the Mongol giant quivered. Yet, even as the Dragon's Son stepped slowly forward, there was one more source of hope.

The gray crystal.

"You—you Old Ones! You'll not let him destroy me! Instead, destroy him now!"

But he looked from the eyes of his advancing enemy into the ball and there was nothing. No—there was something. A face. A laughing face. The face of the Devil's woman companion!

"It is a fake, Ka-Zadok," the Son of the Dragon said. "There is no power of the Old Ones within it."

The crystal fell to the balcony floor, as did the knees of the giant.

"Please. Mercy, I beg you for mercy!"

The Black Master took a half-step backward. "Free Professor Harmon."

Ka-Zadok nodded, trembling. "It is done. He

finds himself now in a room within my castle. Will you show me mercy?"

Red eyes flashed with an emotion Ka-Zadok could not interpret. It was a mixed emotion, one which combined a glint of humor with a trace of something else. Something very close to hatred.

"I . . . yes, Magician. I will show you mercy. A particular brand of mercy, one which is not my own."

And at once Ka-Zadok knew what the words meant. "N-no!"

"Yes, Magician. Yes."

CHAPTER 14

As he sat inside the twin-engine plane, the pilot could not understand. He knew that he had lost consciousness and knew that, since it was now night, he'd been unconscious for hours. He knew that *he* had not landed his aircraft, and he knew that no one else who had been in it had the ability to do so. But he got nowhere with his questions.

The woman, the young man with the hairless head, the old cripple. They would say nothing in response to his questions. Of the three, the woman was the most communicative, and she only addressed herself to two particulars:

One, the aircraft was sound enough to fly them all back to Katmandu.

Two, they could not yet take off. They had to wait for something, which was why the rear hatchway was to remain open until she told him otherwise.

It was true it appeared that something was expected. There was a long crate in the rear of the plane. None of the three seemed especially anxious for him to inspect it all that closely, but he

had looked nonetheless. A crate within a crate, or so it appeared. And inside that, at the bottom, there was nothing except dirt.

Dirt! Was that what this whole crazy thing was about?

And it *was* crazy. The pilot could tell that by the way the three conducted themselves. There had been a fourth, an old priest, but he had left them, showing great deference to the woman. As for these three—

The old man—the professor—looked somehow glad to be alive. The young one looked as if he'd just escaped from something terrible. Both of them appeared exhausted, the young one physically, the old one mentally. As for the woman, she looked somehow pleased. Not that she smiled or anything. It was something in her eyes. Such strange eyes they were. He'd noticed that before, of course. But now . . . well, it was as if she were seeing something—or hearing something—something which neither he nor the others could see or hear. Somehow he was glad he didn't know what it was. Because the way her eyes shined, the way her face looked—

There was, in the expression of the woman, something both exciting and mysterious.

Something which normal human beings shouldn't experience. Ever.

The great iron chair loomed upward in the center of the ice-laden cave. Within the chair sat the magician Ka-Zadok, his eyes filled with terror. Before him stood the Black Master, but it was

not that personage alone which caused the fear within the Mongol giant. It was in large part the thing between them, the thing the Son of the Dragon held in his hands.

The gray crystal sphere which glowed with white-yellow fire.

"Hear me," the Black Master said. "Hear me, Old Ones of the First Land. I bring you greetings—from myself and from your servant, the Magician Ka-Zadok."

The voice from within the globe was calm.

"He has failed us."

"He has failed you."

"And you," the voice from the sphere said. "Will you not now surrender yourself to our will? You cannot succeed against us. You must know that."

"That will not be known until I win or lose, Foul Lords."

"Your power is great. We cannot harm you now, but we draw closer."

"I will be ready for you."

"And you will again lose, this time forever."

"That will be either seen or not seen."

"You will suffer eternally for your impudence. Of what importance is this world to you? Has it treated you like a king? Has it not instead viewed you as an outcast? Why must you persist—"

"I persist because I know no other course. You would not understand my motives, but perhaps you will understand this: I cannot allow you to win, because if you win, I lose."

“Vanity, then? Is that all there is to it? In that case, we would grant you lordship.”

“Under *your* rule. No, that is not acceptable. I remain your enemy. My goal is your destruction, once and for all time.”

“We then have nothing more to discuss. For now.”

“Nothing. Except your servant, Ka-Zadok. Him we must discuss.”

“Why so? Is he not defeated? Will you not do with him as you have done with others who have opposed you?”

“No.” The Son of the Dragon looked into the face of the Mongol. “No. He has asked for mercy.”

The voice within the sphere laughed. “Show him mercy then—if such is your will.”

“I have every intention of doing so. I intend to show him a special brand of mercy. Yours.”

“No!” Ka-Zadok said, his eyes wide with terror. “Please—please, *Master!* I beg—”

The Son of the Dragon smiled. “Do not beg me. Ka-Zadok. Do not call me Master. Beg *Them*—the masters *you* have chosen!”

And then Ka-Zadok saw it. The gray crystal which was placed upon his lap. He drew back his eyes in terror, his hands trying to shield those eyes from the horror which showed itself from within the glass.

“No—*please, no!* Nnnnnn—”

The great iron chair was suddenly empty, the globe falling onto the seat and then rolling onto the floor of the cave.

Count Dracula looked at it for a moment, listening to the screams of one who once was a warrior and then a magician—one who learned the truth of the Curse of Knowledge.

He listened. Then his eyes narrowed. Something flashed within the cave. Something like lightning.

Count Dracula smiled grimly. The sphere was no more than minute crystal fragments on the floor before the huge iron throne. It was over—this part of it, at least. And yet, as he turned to leave the cave, there still was something to be heard.

They were but echoes, but still they were there.

The shrieks of Ka-Zadok. The count would hear them for only a little while longer.

Ka-Zadok would hear them for an eternity.

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